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Bradley Denton

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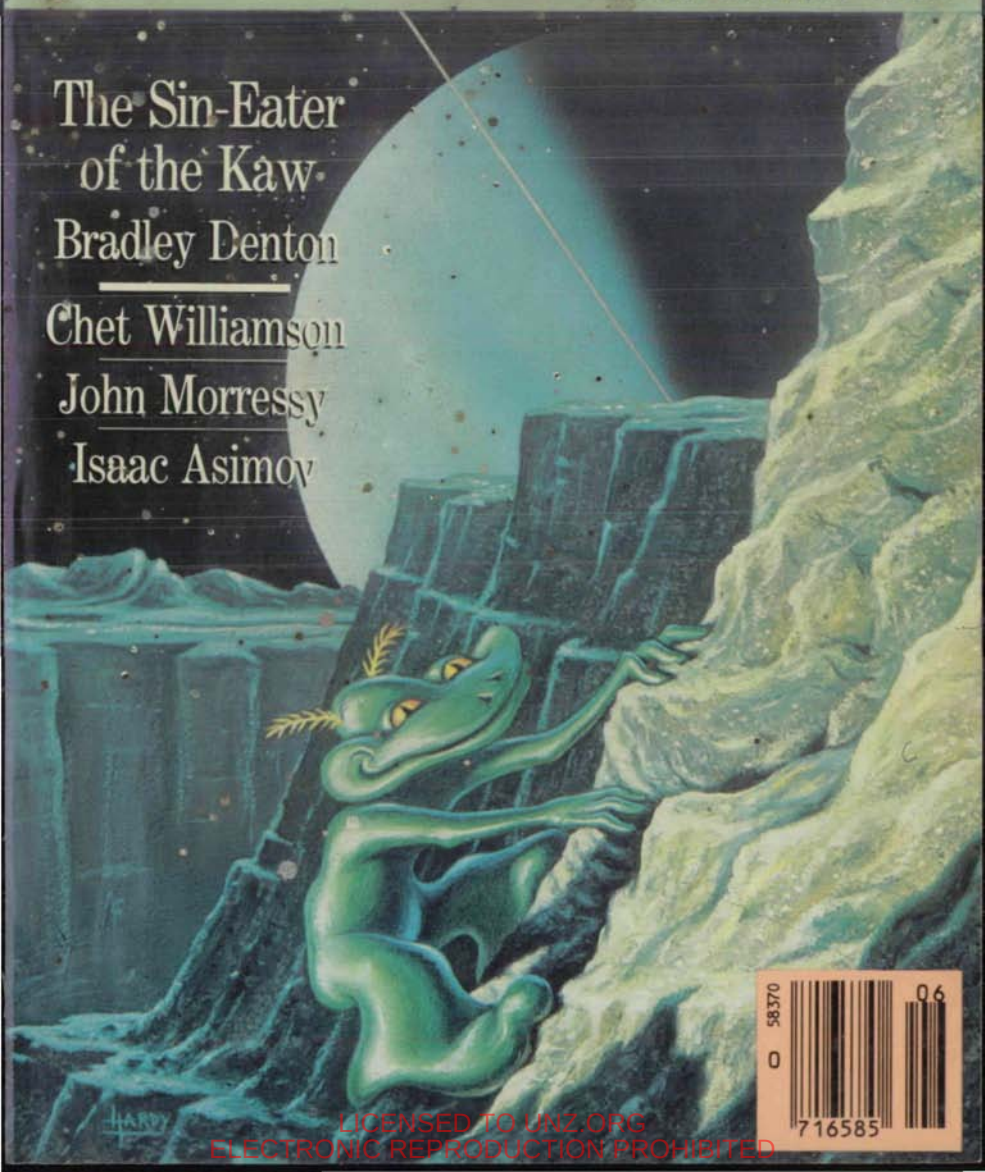

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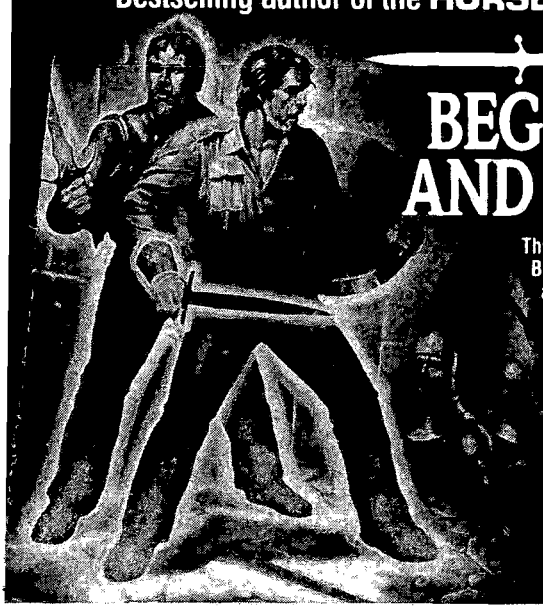

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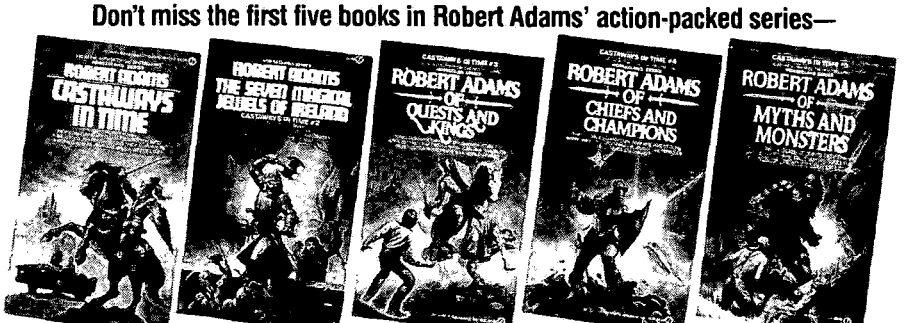

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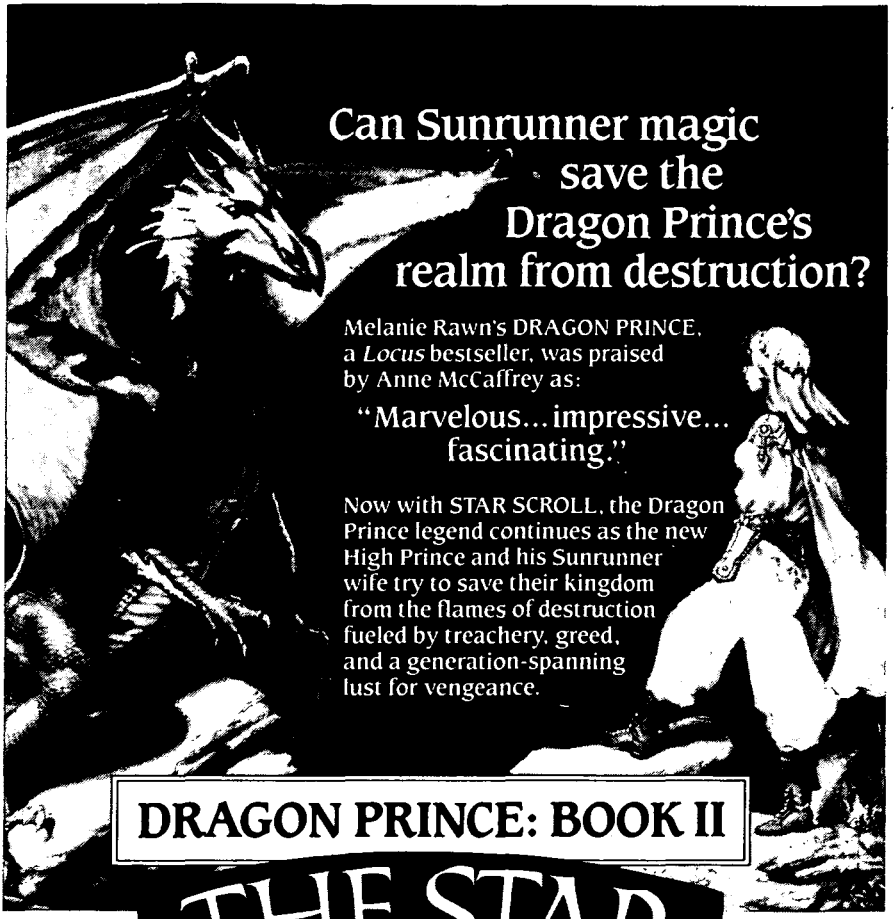
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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 76, No. 6, Whole No. 457, June 1989. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.00 per copy. Annual subscription $21.00; $26.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1989 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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Bradley Denton's last story here was the sharp and satirical "The Calvin Coolidge Home For Dead Comedians" (June 1988). His new story is quite different: a somber and compelling tale about one January in Kansas and a young woman who finds herself drawn to a homeless man who lives on the banks of the Kaw River . . .

THE SIN-EATER OF THE KAW

By Bradley Denton

PAMELA FELT THE DERELICT'S eyes on her the moment that she entered the warmth of the Lawrence Public Library, and she couldn't help looking at him. He was sitting, shoulders slumped, on the padded bench against the foyer's limestone wall, cradling a lumpy plastic trash bag in his arms. He was wearing a dirty blue corduroy cap with torn earflaps, a brown polyester jacket over a faded plaid shirt, green-and-white checked trousers, and crusted sneakers. Irises the color of the slush outside stared at her from a mottled, stubbled face that might have been forty or forty thousand years old.

She turned away, sorry that she had let herself look, and walked rapidly through the foyer toward the horseshoe-shaped circulation desk. As soon as she finished Donald's errands, she could go home to her apartment, change from secretarial clothing into a sweat suit . . . and spend what was left of the evening waiting for his call.

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She felt mild disgust at the thought. Twenty-seven years old, and she still found herself waiting for her boyfriend to telephone. On the other hand, she preferred waiting on a phone call to waiting for the bathroom. She almost hoped that Donald's final interview in Kansas City had gone badly, because if he were offered the job, he would probably ask her to move into his new place.

The thin woman inside the horseshoe didn't raise her eyes from her magazine until Pamela dropped Donald's borrowed books onto the desk. Frowning, the librarian said, "Nice weather for ducks, isn't it?"

Pamela loosened the wool scarf from around her face and neck. "Only if they're from Alaska. The temperature's going to keep dropping all night, so they might find their little webbed feet stuck in blocks of ice by morning."

The librarian looked at her as though she had just spoken in Russian. "I see," the thin woman said tersely, reaching for the books.

"I need to renew them all," Pamela said. It felt like the hundredth time she'd spoken the words. Donald kept library books month after month before reading them; if it weren't for her, he'd be up to his eyeballs in fines.

The librarian nodded and left the desk to check whether anyone had requested a recall of any of the books. Pamela took off her stocking cap and ruffled her short, dark hair, glad to be free of the itch for a few moments.

"Spare a dollar, ma'am?"

She heard the thick voice and smelled the deathlike stench of its accompanying breath in the same instant. Before she could react, a hand gripped her left forearm through the down padding of her coat.

"Just a dollar," the voice said. "I wanna get a cup of coffee at the Burger Shack. They make good coffee."

Pamela forced herself to turn toward the voice and saw the derelict from the foyer. He was short and stooped, and he smiled up at her with teeth that were like the ragged ends of chewed twigs.

"No," she said weakly, pulling away from him. His fingers left smudges on her blue nylon coat sleeve.

The derelict kept his hand extended and stepped closer. His other hand held the neck of his trash bag, which bumped against his knees. "I can earn it," he said.

Pamela, backing away, shook her head.

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The librarian reappeared. "Out!" she snapped, pointing at the derelict. "This is the fourth time you've bothered a patron today! If I see you again, I'll call the police!"

The derelict's face crumpled, and his eyes dulled with disappointment. "I can *earn* it," he muttered, and then shuffled away in the direction of the foyer. Pamela didn't watch to see if he went outside, but stared at the desk's smooth veneer and tried to keep from shuddering.

"Did he assault you?" the librarian asked. "If he did, I'll call the police anyway."

Pamela looked up. "No." Her voice still sounded weak.

"Well, if you're sure." The librarian picked up a date-due stamp and flipped open the first of Donald's books. "I don't know why those people come to Lawrence — we surely don't have facilities for them. Why don't they go to Kansas City, where somebody could do something with them?" She paused as if waiting for an answer, but all Pamela could do was shrug.

The librarian sighed. "I'm renewing these," she said, stamping the first book, "but they're a week late. The total fine's $3.50." Pamela was sure that the books were only one day overdue, but she didn't argue.

"I surely hope February will be warmer than January has been," the librarian said as she stamped the last book. "There. You have a happy new year."

Pamela mumbled a thank-you as she scooped up the books, then hurried away. She felt an unaccountable guilt when she saw that the bench in the foyer was empty. Outside, a cold mist was falling, freezing as it hit the ground.

She left the books in her Renault in the library parking lot, then pulled her hat over her ears, wrapped her scarf around her mouth and nose, and walked up Vermont Street toward the post office. She was beginning to lose the physical tension that had knotted her muscles in the library, but she still felt uneasy. Part of the feeling was the result of the weather — the gray sky pressing down on her head; the bare trees lining the street; the wet, sanded sidewalk — but part of it was also due to the fact that she couldn't stop thinking about the derelict.

He had only wanted a dollar . . . just one stupid dollar, and he would have stopped bothering her and wouldn't have had to leave the library until closing. She had spent three and a half times that to pay a non-

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existent fine on four mysteries and a VCR movie catalog. So what if he would have used the money to get drunk? It was January in Kansas, which meant that a *lot* of people were using their money to get drunk.

She shivered as she reached the corner and waited for the light that would let her cross the street to the post office. The temperature was supposed to fall to eleven degrees Fahrenheit before morning. Slush would turn to hard crystal, streets would freeze slick enough to skate on, and if the mist continued much longer, tree branches would droop from the weight of tubular layers of ice. Down by the Kaw River, a quarter of a mile north of where she stood, a thin crust would replace the strip of scummy foam that usually separated the water from the mud and rocks of the riverbank.

As the light turned green and Pamela started to cross, her thoughts of the river followed it under the twin bridges of Vermont and Massachusetts streets, which converged at the north bank. She had read in the paper that it was there that Lawrence's homeless people gathered to try to survive the winter nights. Occasionally, the bodies of vagrants were discovered on the rocks, abandoned, alone. Last year a corpse had been found with its throat cut open. Usually, though, the derelicts simply froze to death.

Would a dollar have made a difference for any of them? Pamela wondered. Would an hour in the Burger Shack, nursing coffee laced with wine, have meant one more day of life?

She slipped and almost fell stepping onto the curb, saving herself by grabbing the 15-MINUTE PARKING sign. As she pushed open one of the post office's double doors, she thought of how ironic it would have been to smash her skull on the sidewalk while worrying about whether a bum would die for lack of a dollar.

The post office seemed deserted, which didn't make her feel any better. The lobby was always gloomy, and the rectangular cave of brass-and-glass p.o. boxes was gloomier still. The cave's sputtering fluorescent lights glowed only at the ends of the tubes, and Pamela had to lean close to the rows of boxes to find Donald's. She didn't know why he had a box here anyway, since he never received anything that would be worth stealing from his East Lawrence apartment's mail drop. She removed her gloves and put them into a coat pocket so that she could grasp the box's tiny knob.

Before she could enter the combination, she heard a soft thumping noise behind her: the sound of the library derelict's trash bag hitting his

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knees. Her first thought was that she was being given a second chance to do something nice, but as she turned, it occurred to her that this derelict might see this as an opportunity to punish her for not doing it the first time. By the time that she was facing him again, she felt as though her heart had stopped dead.

He was ten feet away at the mouth of the cave. Even in the poor light, though, Pamela could see his slush-colored eyes peering at her — at first hopefully, and then, as he recognized her, with the same disappointment she had seen there after their earlier encounter. Mechanically, he turned and began to shuffle away again.

"Wait," Pamela heard herself say. Her voice sounded shrill despite the muffling effect of her scarf. When the derelict paused and looked back, she wished she hadn't spoken. She felt chilled into immobility by his gaze, and was able to start fumbling with her purse only when she realized that there was only one way to get rid of him now. Stray fibers from her scarf chafed her lips, creating a horrible itch that she couldn't take time to rub away. The junk in her purse had tangled so badly that she was afraid she would never find her wallet.

"That's O.K., ma'am," the derelict said.

"No, no, wait," Pamela said immediately, and again wished that she hadn't.

Just as she finally grasped her wallet, she remembered that after buying lunch, she'd had a ten-dollar bill and four ones left. Now that she'd paid Donald's fine, though, she had only the ten and two quarters. Fifty cents hardly seemed enough to give the derelict after making him wait, but —

She pulled out the ten and held it at arm's length.

The derelict came to her, his trash bag bumping before him, and plucked the bill from her hand. He did it so carefully, with such an obvious effort to keep his fingers from brushing hers, that Pamela felt her face flush with an uncomfortable mixture of shame and gratitude.

The derelict stared at the bill. "It's so much," he said, his voice low. "I hafta earn it."

Pamela's emotions shifted closer to horror as she realized that the money hadn't gotten rid of him after all. If she had given him the fifty cents, he would have taken it and left, but the ten-dollar bill had activated the remnants of his pride.

"No, please, that's all right," she said.

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The derelict shook his head, the earflaps of his cap bouncing as if made of flesh. "I always pay m'way," he said, putting the money into his jacket.

It was the most obvious lie Pamela had ever heard. "Well, I don't want to be paid," she said, "so please leave me alone." She had to suppress a wince at the sting of her own words, but at the same time she began to turn toward Donald's p.o. box. That movement would say that she was through with the derelict, that he was dismissed.

She wasn't able to complete it. The derelict's pale eyes still gazed at her, and she was afraid to turn her back on them.

"You don't think I can earn it," he said.

Pamela decided that she had to be free of him even if it meant being cruel. "As far as I'm concerned," she said, "the only way you can earn that money is to spend it on something besides liquor." She wondered if she had ever before said anything so trite.

The derelict nodded. "M'name's Griggs," he said. "D'you have anythin' t' eat?"

She couldn't believe it. She had just given him ten dollars and told him to get lost, and now he was introducing himself and asking for food.

"Anythin' at all," Griggs said, revealing his awful teeth. "A Life Saver, or a piece o' gum."

Desperate, Pamela fumbled in her purse again and found a roll of breath mints with two left. She held it at arm's length as she had the ten-dollar bill, grasping it by a trailing ribbon of paper.

Griggs shook his head, making his earflaps bounce again. "Not like that, ma'am. Unwrap one an' hold it a few seconds, like this." He made a fist.

Pamela was about to ask why, but stopped herself. She knew now that the derelict was crazy, so her only option was to humor him. As quickly as she could with her nervous fingers, she pulled a mint free of the wrapper and held it in her right fist. She put the remaining candy into her coat pocket.

Griggs nodded. "Good. Now, this ain't guaranteed to work, 'cause you're s'posed to be naked and have the food laid out on your skin —"

Oh God, he was a pervert who was going to leave her nude body in a cave of brass and glass. . . .

"— and usually you're s'posed to've just died, but you don't want t' take off your clothes or die, so we'll do as best we can. Think of the worst thing you ever done."

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Pamela, as confused as she was afraid, couldn't help asking, "What?"

Griggs chuckled. It was a wet, phlegmy sound. "Well, it don't have to be the very worst thing. A little piece o' peppermint won't hold anythin' big. Which ain't t'say that a lady like yourself could ever commit any big sin, ma'am."

"Sin?" Pamela hated the sound of her voice. The more she responded to him, the more likely it became that he would—

"Yes, ma'am," Griggs said, interrupting her thought. "You know, the bad things you've done that y'carry around for all eternity." He was looking at her intently, his pale eyes reflecting and amplifying the dim light. "Think of a sin you been carryin' around since you was little, an' squeeze it with your fist."

As Griggs talked, Pamela considered flinging the mint at his face and trying to dash past him . . . but then, as he finished, a memory flooded her, drowning all other thoughts.

She had been nine years old, taking swimming lessons at a community pool in Wichita. During the free-swim time at the end of the day's session, she had grown tired of the constant pestering of a younger girl named Sharon. Do this with me, Pammy; do that with me, Pammy; are you my friend, Pammy? Finally, when no instructors or lifeguards were looking, Pamela had dunked the bothersome child at the shallow end of the pool. Thrashing away, Sharon had run headfirst into the white concrete rim and had come up screaming, her nose and mouth dripping crimson into the greenish water. Pamela had stood motionless, horrified, while two instructors had come to pull Sharon out. They had taken her to a hospital, and Pamela had spent the rest of the day huddled on her bed at home, waiting for punishment.

It had never come. Sharon had lost a baby tooth and some skin from her nose, but she had never told on Pamela. At first, Pamela had been overjoyed, but later, after she had seen Sharon's face. . . . She had tried to make it up to her, to be nice, but the younger girl had never again given her anything more than a sad look. Sharon and her family had moved away several months later, but Pamela had never forgotten or forgiven herself for what she had done to a child who had wanted nothing more than to be her friend.

"'at's enough," Griggs said, touching her fist with one grimy finger. "I'll take it now."

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Feeling dazed, Pamela watched as her hand opened like a flower to reveal the mint. The candy was sticky from the sweat of her palm, but Griggs plucked it up and popped it into his mouth without hesitating. It cracked between his rotten teeth like a sliver of shaved ice. The derelict's Adam's apple bobbed, and then he smiled.

"It ain't much," he said, "but it's payment, I reckon. Lord knows I've had worse." He touched the bill of his cap. "Evenin', ma'am." As he turned away, his trash bag rustled with a sound like dead leaves.

When he was gone, Pamela collected Donald's mail and chided herself for having been afraid. Griggs was an old man who needed a bath; nothing more. He would probably die within a year or two, poor guy.

But she had helped him, she decided as she left the cave and went out into the cold mist again. For a little while his life would be better because of the money she had given him. It was the only reason she could think of to explain why she felt so good. She was scarcely able to keep from running or dancing across the icy street.

PAMELA FELL asleep on the couch with the television mumbling to her from across the living room. At first her dreams were full of paths that ended in empty space and streets paved with gelatin, but soon she found herself standing in the swimming pool in Wichita, the summer sun blazing so brightly off the white concrete that she had to squint to see. The water was only ankle-deep, so she decided that she might as well get out — but then she saw that the pool was surrounded by hundreds of little girls in blue swimsuits, each one swinging her arms as if preparing to dive. But if they dove into ankle-deep water. . . .

One of them leaped, and Pamela ran splashing across the pool to catch her; but as she caught that child, another on the far side jumped. Pamela dropped the first child on its bottom so that she could run to catch the second, then dropped the second to catch the third, and then the third to catch the fourth. Soon she was dashing from one side to the other without rest, breaking stride only to dodge one of the growing number of crying children who sat in the shallow water. But even as the number of children in the pool increased, so, too, did the number waiting to jump. She would be here forever, trying desperately to save each child, but unable to hold any of the girls long enough to comfort them.

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It went on and on until the bottom of the pool was crowded with wailing children up to their necks in water. Pamela could hardly move through them fast enough to catch each jumper, and she knew it wouldn't be long before she missed one. That child would crash headfirst into another, and then it would happen again and again as Pamela missed more and more, and the water would turn the color of rust.

As she struggled across to catch what must be the ten-thousandth child, the water level dropped with a terrific sucking noise. Griggs, covered with black slime, appeared in her path.

He grasped her arm as she tried to get past him. "My turn, ma'am," he said, smiling a rotten-toothed smile, and then looked down at a squalling child who had wrapped her arms around his filthy legs. He used his free hand to give the crying girl a peppermint stick from his trash bag.

Pamela pulled away and found herself sitting high above the pool in the lifeguard's chair. Below her, Griggs scampered to and fro, catching each jumper with ease and flinging peppermint sticks right and left. Each little girl who caught a candy cane stood up, made her way to the ladder, and disappeared. Gradually the pool began to empty, and the number of children waiting to jump dwindled.

Pamela tried to call down to Griggs to thank him, but found her mouth full of peppermint stick. One red swirl liquefied and dripped onto the shiny blue fabric of her swimsuit. It was the prettiest thing she had ever seen.

She awoke with the cool bite of peppermint still on her tongue, but as she opened her eyes, she knew that she was tasting Donald's breath. His smooth-shaven oval face filled her vision, so close that it was out of focus. He was wearing his long, eggshell-colored winter coat, and the flickering light from the television made him look like a ghost.

"Greetings," he said, as though she were a space alien. It was what he always said. Pamela thought it was a stupid habit, but she had resigned herself to putting up with a few irritations for the sake of love.

She grunted sleepily, then muttered, "Never should've given you a key."

He kissed her forehead. "I would've rung the bell, but I thought you'd be in bed. I didn't want to wake you."

"That would've been a tragedy, all right," she said, yawning.

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Donald turned off the television, then helped Pamela up from the couch and kept his arm around her while she stumbled into the bathroom. She considered telling him that she was capable of going to the john by herself, but thought better of it. She was glad he was here, and there was no point in saying anything that might start an argument.

Once they were in bed, he said, "I've got the job. Assistant head of marketing."

"Congratulations," she said, yawning again.

Later, after she was thoroughly awake as a result of their lovemaking, she asked him, "Do you believe in sin?"

Donald was almost asleep. "What?" he asked blearily.

Pamela propper herself up on an elbow. "I said, do you believe in sin?"

He rubbed his eyes. "You feeling guilty?"

"No," she said, tracing her left forefinger through his chest hair. She wondered if she was telling the truth.

"Hinting that we ought to get married?"

"*No.*" She felt his muscles tighten, and realized that she shouldn't have responded so forcefully. "I mean, I was just thinking aloud. A guy I met today made me wonder whether I know what people mean when they talk about sin."

"What guy?" Donald sounded more awake now, and a little angry.

Pamela wished that she'd kept her mouth shut. "Just a bum at the library. He was babbling about everybody being guilty of sin, and it started me thinking, that's all."

Donald switched on the nightstand lamp. "What were you doing talking to a bum — especially to a Jesus-freak bum? That's the kind of schizoid who winds up committing mass murder."

Pamela let her head fall back to her pillow and closed her eyes against the light. "I wasn't talking to him. He came up asking for money and ranting about sin. I gave him some cash, and he left. That's all."

"How much did you give him?"

"*Don't worry about it. It didn't bankrupt me.*"

Donal exhaled sharply. "Considering what good ol' Kansas U. pays you, it wouldn't take much to make bankruptcy a real possibility. I mean, you're only netting. . . ."

Pamela almost told him that her financial status was none of his business — although that might not be entirely true at this point — but she

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was determined not to argue tonight. At least he had driven back from the city to be with her when he could have spent another night in a hotel at his new company's expense. Besides, as long as they were both wide awake, there were better things to do than fight. She rolled on top of him and kissed him until he stopped trying to talk.

As they made love again, though, she couldn't help wondering whether using sex to avoid a conflict was a sin by Grigg's definition.

Much later she lay staring up at nothing and wishing she were someone else. Donald came back from the bathroom and flopped onto the bed beside her, making the headboard thump against the wall. "I nearly passed out in the can," he said. "You drew all the blood away from my brain."

Pamela threw a wad of damp Kleenex onto the floor. "Don't jump on the bed, O.K.? If you put a hole in the wall, I'm the one who'll have to pay for it."

He turned over to switch off the lamp. "Sorry," he said as the light went out.

She wanted to say something to make things better, but decided not to try. She was sure she would only make them worse.

She hoped she wouldn't dream.

Pamela was jolted awake by the fast section of "Stairway to Heaven" blaring from the radio alarm on the nightstand. Reflexively, she swiped at the plastic cube and knocked it to the floor, where it continued to blare.

"Oh, sorry about that, babe," Donald's voice called from the bathroom.

Pamela sat up. "What's going on?" she yelled. Her tongue felt like a slab of corroded iron.

"Can't hear you over Led Zep. How come you keep the thing tuned to that moldy-oldie stuff, anyway?"

She leaned over and yanked the radio's plug from its socket. Before blinking out, the orange numerals read 7:10. "Why'd you set the alarm?" she asked loudly. "It's Saturday, for Chrissake." She felt a headache coming on.

Donald appeared in the doorway dressed in last night's slacks and shirt, his shoes and socks in his hands. "I was afraid I might not be up in time otherwise."

"In time for what?" Pamela was trying not to sound whiny, but it wasn't easy.

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"I've got lunch with my new bosses at noon," he said, "so I need to be at my place by eight if I want fresh clothes and a shave before I head for the city. If we were living together, I could've stayed in bed another hour."

Pamela gave up on trying to hold back her anger. "So if I don't like it, it's my own fault, right?"

Donald rolled his eyes. "I didn't say that, Pammy."

She felt as though she'd been given an electric shock. "Don't call me that! I don't let *anyone* call me that!"

"O.K., O.K.," he said, walking away into the living room.

Pamela got out of bed and followed him. "Why didn't you tell me you were going back today? Why'd you even bother to come over?"

Donald sat on the couch and pulled on his socks. "I told you first thing last night. You must've been too sleepy to remember. As for the second question, I came over because I wanted to see you. I meant to ask you to move to K.C. with me, but then we got busy with other things." He put on his shoes and stood, eyeing her. "It's too chilly to run around naked, Pam."

She was actually thankful for that, because it gave her an excuse to return to the bedroom without answering his implicit question. As she put on her pink flannel robe, she wondered whether Donald would be willing to leave Lawrence if *she* were the one with a job waiting elsewhere.

When she came into the living room again, he was already at the door with his coat on and his books and mail on the floor beside him. "I really am sorry," he said. "I thought you heard me last night. I even asked about setting the alarm, and you mumbled something that sounded like yes."

"It's all right," she said, going to him. He hugged her, as always, too tightly; and his morning breath, as always, was awful. His coat was so bulky that she felt as though she were being held by an overstuffed chair. But it was better than not being held at all.

"Be careful if you go out today," he said in her ear. "The streets'll be slick."

"Same to you."

He released her, then picked up his books and mail and opened the door. An icy gust rushed in, making Pamela feel as though she were still naked. When she drew in a breath, the air became cold needles in her chest.

"Think about . . . moving to the city," Donald said as he stepped outside.

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Pamela nodded and started to close the door.

Donald stopped it with his foot. "And stay away from bums, or start carrying Mace. This town isn't as safe as it used to be, and Kansas City...." His voice trailed off as he turned and walked down the sidewalk toward the complex's parking lot.

Pamela shut and bolted the door, then ran back to the bedroom and jumped into bed, pulling the covers over her head until she stopped shivering. The door had been open less than thirty seconds, but she felt chilled to the bone.

She wondered how bad the wind had been under the Kaw's twin bridges during the night.

She had dressed in long underwear and jeans and was even wearing a sweatsuit under her coat, but she was so cold that she thought she might as well have come out in her robe. The north wind cut at her eyes, nose, and cheeks like millions of tiny razors, and she could hardly feel her toes despite the fact that she was wearing two pairs of thick socks inside her boots. The Vermont Street Bridge's pedestrian walkway wasn't enclosed, and the aluminum railing was only waist-high, so she felt as though she were walking on a wide cable strung between two peaks in the Himalayas.

She paused and faced west, as much to escape the sting of the wind for a moment as to gaze down at the Kaw. Forty feet below her, the gray river looked placid, even though she could hear it rushing over the old eight-foot hydroelectric dam on the east side of the Massachusetts Street Bridge. The rocky riverbank she had just passed over looked as if it should be populated with penguins.

Why was she doing this? she wondered as she turned, head bowed, to continue into the bitter wind. What possible reason could be compelling enough to make her leave her warm apartment for a walk along the coldest stretch of concrete in town? Even vehicular traffic seemed to be avoiding the bridges today.

As she reached the bridge's midpoint (How long was it, anyway? An eighth of a mile?), she paused again and had the perverse thought that it would be easy to lean against the fat aluminum rail, relax her upper body, and tumble over in a limp cartwheel. What would it be like to spin end over end and then hit that smooth grayness? Would the enveloping water feel frigid or warm in comparison to the freezing air?

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She could see that the bundle of clothing had a human being inside.

Pamela put her gloved hands on the rail and leaned out slightly, then jerked back and continued walking at a faster pace than before. This was the first time she'd ever had thoughts that might be considered suicidal. Maybe the wind was freeze-drying her brain as well as her face.

The smart thing to do now would be to go back to the library for her car, then head home and thaw herself. An even smarter thing to do would have been to stay home in the first place . . . but she hadn't been able to stand that this afternoon. The apartment had felt empty and frustrating, so here she was, walking her muscles into constricted lumps over a river called the Kansas by everyone except the people of the state for which it was named. They and their river didn't make any more sense than she did.

She stumbled as she stepped off the bridge walkway onto the sidewalk on the north side of the Kaw, then stopped and wondered where to go next. Except for the river levee with its jogging path, there was nothing in North Lawrence but gas stations and sleazy bars. So why, she asked herself again, was she here in the first place?

She about-faced, but as she did so, she glimpsed a bundle of familiar clothing on the rocks below the levee. She tried to start back across the bridge without a second look, but then, cursing herself through clenched teeth, she turned north again and followed the sidewalk to its intersection with the levee path. As she stepped onto the path itself, she could see that the bundle of clothing had a human being inside, and as she left the path to make her way down the slope, Griggs's mottled cheek came into view beside his cap's earflap.

He was humped over as if frozen in a perpetual cringe against invisible blows, and Pamela felt a terrible certainty that she would discover he was dead. Then she would have to call the police, and her name would be printed in the newspaper under the headline K.U. SECRETARY ON INEXPLICABLE WALK FINDS DECEASED WINO/JESUS FREAK. . . .

She stopped while still fifteen feet up the slope from the lump of cast-off polyester that was Griggs. She didn't want to be the one to find him, to call the police, to have her name in the paper. She didn't want to know anything about what had happened to him, especially if what had

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happened was that he had gotten so drunk on her ten dollars that he had broken his neck.

Yet that was what she was here for, she realized at last; that was why she had walked across the bridge into a windchill of ten below. When she'd left her apartment, she'd told herself that some exercise in the cold air might clear her mind and help her think about her problems with Donald — but on a deeper level she had known, even then, that what she was really planning to do was look for Griggs. And now that she had found him, she wanted an excuse to avoid going near him.

"Mr. Griggs?" she called. If he would say that he was all right, or even if he would move a little, she could leave him here with a clear conscience.

He didn't move. She had no choice but to continue down the slope. As she left the dead grass of the levee and stepped onto the fist-sized rocks of the riverbank, the sound of the water rushing over the dam downstream became an echoing roar. She was almost underneath the Vermont Street Bridge now, and it and its twin amplified the noise. Even if Griggs made some small sound, she wouldn't be able to hear it.

She glanced eastward and saw three men huddled over a driftwood fire fifty feet away under the Massachusetts Street Bridge. To her relief, they ignored her. She wondered why they had also ignored Griggs.

She hesitated a moment when she reached the derelict, then squatted and placed her hands on his shoulders, shaking him. He rocked back and forth without responding, looking like the discarded pile of clothing for which she had first mistaken him.

She shook him hard. Now that she had stopped walking, she was beginning to feel even colder than before. "Wake up!" she shouted over the river's roar. "This is no place to sleep, you stupid old man!" The words made her feel ridiculous, and she shook Griggs harder still in her frustration. Without meaning to, she lost her grip on his coat and shoved him onto his side. It was only as he fell that she saw he had been hunched over his trash bag, hugging it as if it would give him some warmth.

Griggs's eyes opened as he landed hard on the rocks, and he smiled. He had lost several teeth during the night, and his face was as pale as milk.

Pamela felt a sudden fury. "I thought you were *dead!*" she screamed.

Griggs's lips moved, but she couldn't hear whether he actually said anything. It didn't matter, though. If his fellow bums weren't going to help him, she wasn't going to leave him here. She stood and kicked the trash

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bag aside, then stooped and grasped the derelict's wrists.

"Come on," she said, pulling him to his feet. It was like lifting a scarecrow. "I'll take you to the Salvation Army . . . or something." The Salvation Army had a building somewhere in town, but she didn't know whether it was used to house vagrants.

That wasn't important right now, she decided as she picked up the trash bag with one hand and kept a grip on Griggs's arm with the other. Regardless of what she told either him or herself, she wasn't taking him to the Salvation Army. Not right away, at least.

The ascent to the street seemed to take hours, and Pamela felt completely numb long before they made it. She had to drag Griggs every step of the way, because he was either half-frozen or drunk and was unable to climb the slope as well as a two-year-old might. Adding to the burden was the trash bag, which weighed more than the derelict himself.

Finally they stood on the sidewalk, resting with their backs to the wind. Pamela's breath formed thick clouds of steam, and she watched them dissipate so that she wouldn't have to look at Griggs. She could feel his eyes on her, though, and eventually had to meet their gaze.

He was still smiling. "I knew you'd come, ma'am," he said. His breath smelled like the candy she had given him the day before. She suspected that he had spent her money on peppermint schnapps.

She tugged on his arm, and they started across the bridge. Below them the Kaw still appeared placid, its smooth gray skin masking the cold rush of water underneath.

It was while Griggs was in the bathroom taking a shower that Pamela, curled into a ball on the couch, began to have some feeling in her toes again. She also began to doubt her sanity. The derelict might be a murderer or a maniac . . . or *anything*.

The telephone on the end table rang, and she picked up the receiver automatically. It wasn't until she heard Donald's voice that it occurred to her that the hissing of the shower might be audible to him even though the bathroom door was closed.

"Greetings, and where've you been?" he said. "This is the third time I've tried to call you this afternoon — evening, now. Your machine promised you'd get back to me, but it lied."

Pamela half-covered the mouthpiece with her free hand. "I was . . .

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shopping," she said. "Didn't buy anything, though." A small voice insisted that she should tell him about the derelict, but a louder voice screamed that nothing she could do would be worse.

"Can you hear me O.K.?" he asked. "I can hardly make you out."

She moved her hand to cover still more of the mouthpiece. "Cold weather messes up the lines," she said.

"Yeah, I guess. Listen, babe, I just called to tell you I won't be making it back tonight or tomorrow. In fact, I probably won't get over to Lawrence again until Friday. I've got all kinds of prep work for my job, and when I'm not doing that, I need to be apartment-hunting. I've got some viewing appointments tomorrow, and I thought you might want to look at the places with me."

Pamela almost forgot about Griggs. "You're looking at apartments on a Sunday?"

"Sure. What do you say?"

He sounded casual, but Pamela couldn't help thinking that he was pressuring her. "I haven't even said I'll move."

The line was silent for a few seconds. "Yeah, but you'll be over most weekends anyway, so I thought—"

"You're taking a lot for granted."

The pitch of Donald's voice went up sharply. "Jesus, I'm just asking for some help looking for an apartment. If you don't want to, just say—"

"I don't want to."

The silence was longer this time, and when Donald finally broke it, his voice was a forced monotone. "I know all this has you on edge. The job's important to me, but I shouldn't expect it to be important to you, too. Tell you what — I'll call back Monday evening so we can talk. After you've thought about it more, I mean."

Pamela let out a breath that she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Look, I just don't want to drive in this weather. I nearly wrecked going downtown today, and it's supposed to snow tonight." She hadn't heard a weather report all day.

"I understand. Let me give you my room number here just in case—"

The hiss of the shower stopped, and the apartment echoed with the noise of a rheumy, hacking cough.

"I've got to go," Pamela said abruptly.

"Hey, wait, just let me give you—"

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"All right, all right, but hurry." She couldn't keep the panic out of her voice, and the only escape she could think of was another lie. "My dinner's boiling over."

He gave her the number hurriedly, and she pretended to write it down. By the time she hung up, she had already forgotten it.

"Got a beau, ma'am?" Griggs's voice croaked from the bathroom doorway.

Pamela turned to look at him. He was standing on the brown living room carpet, peering at her while holding a towel wrapped around his waist. His pale, stooped body was reed-thin except for a ludicrous pot-belly, and his head, bald save for a few colorless wisps, was huge in comparison to his emaciated frame. He had shaved with one of her disposable razors, but had not done a good job. Still dripping wet, he was rapidly becoming encircled by a dark ring on the floor.

"Get back onto the tile, please," Pamela said.

He continued to peer at her without moving.

She gave up. "Yeah. I got a beau. So what?"

Griggs stepped backward onto the bathroom floor. "Won't he mind your takin' me in?"

"Not if I don't tell him," she said, standing and walking past the bathroom to her bedroom. "Stay in there and dry yourself while I scrounge up something for you to wear. We'll take your other things to the Laundromat tomorrow. If you ask me, though, most of the stuff in your bag would be better off burned than washed."

"Lying to a loved one's a sin," she heard him say while she was rooting in her dresser's bottom drawer. Then she heard him hawk up phlegm and spit into the toilet. She didn't know which sound was worse.

Griggs ate with a reverence toward food that Pamela hadn't expected. She had imagined that he would wolf down rolls and chicken by the fistfuls, smearing his face with butter and grease. Instead, he ate slowly, using his hands but taking small bites and chewing with his mouth closed. At first she was amazed at how long he chewed each bite, but then realized that his few remaining teeth didn't leave him much choice.

"I'll pay you for all your kindness, ma'am," he said after they had eaten in silence for fifteen minutes. Pamela was startled by his voice and dropped her fork, which clattered on her plate like an alarm. "After yester-

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day," Griggs continued, "y'oughta know I can do it, too."

Pamela swallowed a chunk of broccoli and said, "I don't expect any money for this. I couldn't let you freeze." The truth, though, was that she didn't know why not.

Griggs wiped his mouth on the sleeve of the JAYHAWK BASKETBALL sweatshirt she had given him, and then belched. She was almost relieved; she *wanted* him to behave like an ill-mannered bum. It was the only thing that made her feel superior to him.

"You know I ain't talkin' about money, ma'am," he said. "You know what I done with that little candy yesterday. I took away a sin so you wouldn't have to carry it around no more. I can do more o' that. I'm a sin-eater."

Pamela forced a smile, hoping that it didn't look as artificial as it felt. "I'm an atheist, Mr. Griggs, and have been since I was eighteen. I couldn't be when I was a child because my parents wouldn't let me, but I am now, so I don't care to be told about sin, thank you."

Griggs laughed. It was a weird, barklike noise that gave Pamela gooseflesh. "If bein' a hey-thee-hiss means you don't love God, then I'm with you. God's a sonofabitch." He looked down at his plate. "Least He has been to me."

Pamela rubbed her arms to make the gooseflesh go away. "Love is irrelevant. I just don't believe."

"Same difference." Griggs pointed at the last dinner roll in the basket in the center of the table. "That'll do better'n the candy. You need to lie down and put it here on you —" He pulled up his sweatshirt and touched himself below his breastbone and above his potbelly.

Pamela stood and took her plate and silverware to the sink. "I don't want to hear any more," she said. "I'm letting you sleep on the couch tonight because it's late and the Salvation Army might not have a place for you. But if you scare me, you'll be out in the cold again."

Griggs brought his plate to the sink and handed it to her. "Ain't like I ain't used to it. Ma'am."

"I don't mean to threaten you. But this sin-eating business —"

"Is God's own truth," Griggs said, "or would be if there was such a thing. In your heart you know it, 'cause I freed you of somethin' that tasted like you hurtin' someone. I took it inside me an' gave you peace from it, an' that's the same as givin' you a corner o' heaven, or as takin' away a corner

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o'hell." He turned and left the kitchen, the sweatpants bagging at his ankles like bell-bottoms.

Pamela finished clearing the table, then rinsed the cookware and dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher. That done, she leaned against the counter and stared at the only thing left on the table: the roll in the basket. How much sin could it hold? she wondered. How was sin quantified, anyway? Liters or gallons? Mortals or venials?

She heard Griggs coughing in the living room. If she didn't believe him, then why had she brought him home? It couldn't be that she had done it out of the goodness of her heart — after all, she had seen plenty of other derelicts, and she had done nothing to help *them*.

"What the hell," she said aloud. No one would know. She picked up the roll and went into the living room, where Griggs was waiting.

"Lie on your back," he said, gesturing at the couch.

She hesitated. What if Griggs had only been biding his time to lull her into this moment?

"Those of us who ain't got homes got no home life, neither," he said. "Lie down an' stop worryin'."

She sat on the couch but did not recline. "I don't know what you mean."

Griggs gingerly lowered himself to the floor, his joints cracking, and sat cross-legged. "A bum's crotch forgets its purpose. I can't do nothin' to you, and wouldn't if I could. An' if y'think I'm gonna clobber an' rob you, well, I'll just sit here, and you'll know if I move. Young, healthy woman like you could snap my bones anyhow."

It was probably true. Clutching the roll with one damp hand, Pamela put her feet up and slowly reclined. By the time her head touched the cushion, her mouth was dry and her heart was pounding hard. It seemed to take forever for her fingers to pull up her shirt to expose her abdomen.

"What am I doing?" she whispered.

She placed the roll where Griggs had shown her, and clasped it there with both hands. Then she stared up at the grainy, off-white ceiling, her muscles tense.

"You're tighter'n a sober banker," Griggs said. "Get relaxed, or you ain't gonna remember what you need to be free of."

"I can't help it,' Pamela said, her jaws clenched.

Griggs coughed several times, and when he was through, he said, "All right, ma'am. You fear what y'don't know, so just listen, and pretty

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soon that'll be solved." He coughed again.

Pamela raised her head. "I should take you to a doctor."

He motioned for her to lower her head again. "No damn doctors — and no Salvation Army, neither. You can kick me out whenever you want, but you ain't tellin' me where to go." He wiped his mouth on his sleeve again. "Now, then. Who is this Griggs, you're wonderin', and the wonderin' makes you scared. Well, Griggs is nothin' but the son of a Junction City whore and some Fort Riley private. He watched his mama die o' cancer — seems like it musta been, whatchacallit, lew-key-me-up — when he was seven, an' that was when he started learnin' 'bout sin-eatin' from a bum one of his mama's whore friends brought in. This particular whore friend claimed she was a witch, but everyone else said she was crazy.

"Anyway, Griggs saw his mama's body lyin' naked with bread and meat spread out on it as if she was a table, and he saw this scabby old bum the witch had brought take to eatin' the food. And the witch patted little Griggs and said, "Don'tchew worry, child, 'cause the sin-eater is takin' away your mama's many sins so she can go to Heaven."

Griggs's voice had a droning rhythm, and Pamela found herself entranced by both his words and the very sound of them. She began to relax, just as she had as a child during one of her father's infrequent bedtime stories.

"Soon after his mama went to Heaven," the derelict went on, "Griggs was put in a foster home, an' the witch was put in the state hospital. Griggs got whipped by his new mama a lot, and she took the money what the state give her to take care of him, and spent it on her own kids instead. So the older Griggs got, the more he took to runnin' away; and the more he took to runnin' away, the more time he spent with the bums who hung round the railroad bridge over the Kaw. There was almost as many bums as whores in Junction City in them days. Maybe still are.

"One o' the bums — and you'll prob'ly guess the turn the story takes here, ma'am — one of 'em was the scabby old bum what had eaten Griggs's mama's sins. Every time Griggs ran away from his foster home, this scabby old bum would take him aside an' tell him how in olden days, back in England and such, people knew about sin-eaters, and every town had its own. When someone died, they called in the sin-eater, and he took care o' the dead person's trip to Paradise. Trouble was, all that sin they ate stayed with the sin-eaters, doomin' 'em to Hell, so nobody'd have nothin' to do with 'em except when somebody died. But the scabby old bum said it

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didn't matter if he was shunned, 'cause he had the power of defeatin' Hell, of grantin' peace. And there ain't no greater power, he said."

Griggs paused. Pamela felt drowsy, and she let her hands slide away from the roll on her abdomen. She didn't want to sleep, though, so she asked, "What happened next?"

She felt a warm breeze on her cheek as Griggs's voice returned. "The scabby bum died. Not right away, but like a piece o' fruit gettin' riper and riper until it molders an' withers. An' the dyin' sin-eater explained that all the sins inside him would take him to Hell, meanin' that they'd stay with his soul and torment it forever, unless he found a new sin-eater to remove 'em as his soul left his body. That was how a sin-eater got started, he said — by eatin' the sins built up in *another* sin-eater. Matter o' fact, the scabby old bum claimed he was carryin' thirty-two generations of sin built up inside from all over the world, countin' all he'd inherited and all he'd eaten himself. To look at him, you'd've believed it, too.

"By now Griggs was fourteen an' with his second set o' foster parents, who weren't no better than the first. So one day he run away and didn't go back, and he an' the scabby old bum, who couldn't hardly walk, hitched a ride twenty miles east to Manhattan. They went down to the Kaw to camp, and that's where the scabby old sin-eater died 'bout a week later. Griggs dumped a can o' beans on him before he was cold, and did what was necessary.

"That's pretty much the story, ma'am, 'cept that Griggs left the state for a time and bummed all over, even got to Bolivia once, eatin' sins and bein' shunned. After a while, though, he decided to come back to the Kaw, his only true home, and stick close to it. Oh, one more thing: In his travels, he found that a few sins could be gotten rid of while a body was still alive an' kickin'. Not many folks take advantage o' that, though, seein' as how Griggs ain't too pretty to look at. Come to think of it, ma'am, you might be the subject o' some bad gossip if your neighbors seen you bring me in."

Pamela's eyelids were so heavy that all she could see was a fuzzy gray light. She could still feel her heartbeat, but it was slow now, thumping lazily. "The neighbors are jerks," she tried to say, and heard her voice as a distant murmur. This must be what being hypnotized was like, she thought, and noted with mild, sleepy surprise that the idea didn't frighten her.

"All right, now," Griggs said, his voice surrounding her like a warm bath. "You remember somethin', ma'am. Somethin' bad. You don't hafta

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be afraid, 'cause after this, it ain't ever gonna bother you again. . . ."

The derelict's voice faded, drifting away like bubbles in a sluggish river, as Pamela began to dream about a lie she had told her parents when she was seventeen.

She felt one quick pang of sorrow — *I should have told them the truth so they'd know I wasn't sorry I did it, so they'd know I didn't believe the same things they did anymore* — and then became filled with euphoria that made her feel as though she were floating high above the earth, looking down and pitying the pain-racked masses below.

ON MONDAY morning, Pamela saw her job with new eyes. Ordinarily, working in the university's financial-aid office was neither boring nor exciting, and while she had never felt dissatisfied, she had never felt particularly fortunate, either. Today, though, it occurred to her for the first time that the forms she filed and the reports she typed represented people with hopes and dreams. She began to feel that what she did had importance, that it made a difference in the world outside the walls of the office.

She had Griggs to thank. Four times over the course of the weekend, he had freed her from successively greater sins, and each time she had felt as though something heavy had crumbled away from her like a great wall of ancient bricks.

The sin-eating seemed to have exhausted the old man, though; when she'd left for work, he had been sound asleep on the couch, his breathing a hollow rasp. She wanted to call to see how he was, but was afraid that he might think she was checking to be sure he hadn't run off with her small appliances. She didn't want him to think that, because she had come to trust him . . . and if that was a stupid thing to do, she was willing to live with the consequences.

Instead, she thought, she should call her doctor. Pamela didn't know much about derelicts and their diseases, but the phlegmy rattle of Grigg's breathing had to mean that something wasn't right. Even if she made an appointment for him, though, she didn't think he would keep it — and if she tried to force him, he might flee into the cold and become even sicker.

So maybe it was best to leave things as they were for now, because at least he could stay warm and eat decent meals as long as he stayed with her. Those factors alone were sure to improve his health, and sooner or

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later she would be able to persuade him that doctors weren't all bad.

Sooner or later. . . . How long was she going to let him stay, anyway?

She didn't want to think about that, so she began working harder, typing and filing with an energy that made her office mates tease her with speculations concerning the illegal drugs she must have used over the weekend. She teased them right back. She hardly ever did that, and they began to look at her as if seeing her for the first time. The rest of the morning went swiftly.

Her wonderful mood lasted until lunchtime, when she sat in the cafeteria with a clerk from the chancellor's office who was asking her when she was going to get around to making permanent arrangements with Donald. That reminded her that he was going to call tonight and that she would have to think of something to say.

Her world compressed into dread. Despite the way Griggs had made her feel, she was still carrying walls that were bigger and heavier than the ones he had destroyed.

The afternoon was filled with typographical errors, improperly filled-out forms, and a constantly ringing telephone that always turned out to be a wrong number. Pamela remembered the morning as if it had been a dream.

Griggs was lying on the couch when she returned home that evening. As she opened the door, she thought that he looked as if he hadn't moved since morning, but then she saw that he had put on his sneakers. He didn't react as she came in, though, and she felt a stab of fear at the thought that he might have died during the day. When she closed the door, he awoke coughing, his body shuddering and twitching as he tried to rise to a sitting position.

"You look rotten," Pamela said, going to the couch to help him up. "If you don't see a doctor soon, you might have to be hauled there in an ambulance."

Griggs sat with his head between his knees until his coughing subsided, then looked up at Pamela and grinned. She counted only four teeth. He had lost two or three more during the day.

"'Course I look rotten," he said, his spine cracking as he sat up straighter. "Rotten at the core with sins both committed an' eaten, ma'am, purely rotten at the core. The worst of 'em sit down there an' eat outward, killin'

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you as they go. That's why a sin-eater can rid you of *all* your sin just as you die — 'cause it's there at the surface." He thumped a finger against his solar plexus.

Pamela sat beside him. "And yours is coming up, is that it?"

"As surely as bile, ma'am. As surely as bile."

He sounded completely matter-of-fact, which made her angry. The afternoon had brought her back down from the weekend's craziness, and she was no longer willing to believe that her joy had been anything more than a psychological escape from her troubles with Donald. She could see clearly again, and what she saw was that Griggs was dying.

"You're wrong," she said. "It's not sin doing this to you — it's pneumonia or emphysema. It's something that can be treated, and I don't mean by sin-eating."

Griggs's slush-colored eyes fixed on hers, holding her as they had at the post office. "It's the truly dark stuff that's down deep," he said. "The stuff we never really do, but just think about over an' over. But the only sins I can take from a livin' person are the ones floatin' near the surface. That's why you've gone back to feelin' like you always did, 'cause your core's the same. Y'see, the ones down there don't come up 'til death . . . an' if they ain't eaten then, they leave with the soul an' stay with it." His eyes shifted away, and he chuckled, shaking his head. "I sound like a goddamn preacher repeatin' hisself. All I mean t' say's that I can take more o' your light sins if you want t' feel good again, but you're gonna be stuck with the other stuff for a while."

Pamela put her hand on his shoulder. His bones felt sharp through the sweatsuit. "Listen, I've tried your way, so now you try mine. Let me take you to my doctor tomorrow." She hesitated and decided to humor him. "If you're right, and it's sins coming up, then there's nothing to be done. But if I'm right, if it's a disease, then maybe the doctor can take care of it. Then you could go on doing good, eating sins, for another ten or twenty years."

Griggs stood, shrugging off her hand. "Thank you for your kindness, ma'am. Time for me t' go."

Pamela was nonplussed. What had she said? "Why?"

Griggs shuffled across the room, stooped over in obvious pain, to where his laundered clothes were folded and stacked by the television. The corduroy cap sat atop the pile, looking like a blue igloo. "You're back out there where people wear suits, ma'am. You don't believe none of what's

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happened between us, so you want t' hand me over t' some needle-an'-pill pusher. Dont get me wrong: I ain't mad at you; but I ain't gonna do it, neither." He reached down, grunting with effort, and gathered up the clothes, holding them to his chest. "Besides, I don't want t' live another ten or twenty years, or even two. I've had a bellyful."

Pamela stood. "It's getting worse outside," she said. "My car radio said it'd be five below before midnight, with a north wind. You'd better stay. No doctors; I promise."

Griggs peered at her over the stack of polyester in his arms. "With all due respect, ma'am, I know better. I've tasted your soul. You don't want me here no more, an' if I stayed, you'd have me in a hospital the next time I so much as spit."

"That's not—" Pamela began, but stopped because she felt herself about to lie. She lied to her family, to her friends, and to Donald as frequently and easily as they probably lied to her, but she didn't want to lie to Griggs.

The derelict nodded. "See, you know it, too. Now, if I can borrow your bathroom again, I'll put on some o' my own clothes. Then if you could spare a bag t' replace the one you threw away, I'll pack up an' go."

Pamela took a faltering step toward the kitchen. "I'll get the bag, but . . . keep the sweat suit. Please." She couldn't imagine why it meant so much to her.

Griggs coughed into the pile of clothing. "Thank you kindly," he said. "These others is all dead men's clothes, from the last seven I helped to Paradise, and I ain't in no hurry to put 'em on."

Pamela went into the kitchen. She would not cry. She had done all she could, and that was that. She would not cry.

While she was tearing a trash bag from the roll under the sink, she heard the apartment door open, the rush of cold air hit her almost simultaneously. Griggs was leaving without saying good-bye. She ripped the bag free and ran back into the living room.

But it was not Griggs who stood in the doorway; it was Donald. He was staring at the derelict, who had put on his cap and was coughing again.

Pamela stopped. Donald stepped inside, turned toward her, and said, "Greetings." His voice sounded normal, but his eyes were angry. "Is this who I heard Saturday?"

She didn't answer. No matter what she said now, he would know that

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she had lied to him. And she, regardless of that, would feel persecuted.

Griggs, clutching his pile of clothers with one arm, came to her and pulled the fresh trash bag from her grasp. "I'll pack outside," he said. "You're losin' all your heat."

Donald didn't stand aside as Griggs went to the doorway. "Who are you?" he asked. Now his voice matched the look in his eyes.

Griggs grinned up at him. "I'm the son of a Junction City whore," he said. "Pleased t' meet you." Then he walked around Donald into the frigid evening.

Pamela wanted to go after him, but didn't know what she would do when she caught him. Besides, Donald would follow, and she knew she wouldn't be able to stand that.

Donald closed the door, then removed his eggshell-colored coat and crossed the room to the couch. "Was he on this?" he asked. "I don't want to sit here if he was."

Pamela went to the couch and sat on it herself, as far away from Donald as possible. She wanted to be furious, but all she could manage was a dull sense of alienation. "He slept here," she said. "Two nights. I made him shower first. You don't have to worry about catching anything."

Donald remained standing, his coat slung over his arm like a shield. "What about you? Am I going to catch anything from you?"

She stared at his angry eyes. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. After I called Saturday, I realized that I'd heard someone coughing. I thought about it all day yesterday, then called today to leave a message on your machine. I was going to tell you I was coming over tonight, but I got him instead. You know what he told me?"

Pamela was beginning to feel as though her blood were draining away, leaving her a husk. She couldn't even shake her head when Donald asked his question. All she could do was continue staring at his strange, smooth face, wondering who he was.

"He told me," Donald said, "that you were full of sin. He told me he'd *tasted* it. And then he told me that he was too old and couldn't take it all." Donald paused and looked at Pamela as if expecting her to protest. When she did nothing, he said, "I started to call the Lawrence cops because I thought he might have. . . ." His voice quavered. "I was afraid he might have hurt you." He looked away and took a deep breath. "Then I made

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myself call your work number first. I hung up when you answered."

Donald dropped his coat on the floor and walked across the room to sit heavily on the carpet beside the television. He rubbed his eyes.

"I see," Pamela said. It seemed to her that her voice must be coming from a small box somewhere over her head. "You thought I slept with him."

Donald's hands dropped away from his face, and now his eyes reminded her of Griggs's when she had first refused to give him a dollar. "Of course not. But I didn't know what *he* would do, Pammy — no, you don't like to be called that. Sorry."

"So why did you hang up this afternoon?" she asked.

"I didn't have anything to say."

"But you came over here anyway so you could hit me with your righteous yuppie indignation." Pamela was surprised at the voice coming from the box. It was mean.

Donald shook his head. "I was still worried. I even skipped a meeting so I could be here when you came home. Then, when I saw you, and him, all I could think about — all I'm *still* thinking about — is that I'm going to lose my job because you tried to make like Mother Teresa for a worthless bum."

"So you want me to say I'm sorry — is that it?"

Donald stood and went to the door. "I shouldn't have come. You don't want me here."

Pamela said nothing.

"Just tell me why you did it," Donald said. "Why'd you bother with a creep like that, anyway?"

Pamela thought of how good she had felt after Griggs had eaten the mint at the post office, and how wonderful she had felt that morning. "It gave me something to do so I wouldn't have to think about anything else."

"Like me, you mean."

Pamela didn't acknowledge that. She didn't have to. "I knew I was playing . . . Mother Teresa for the wrong reasons. That's why I didn't tell you. I felt stupid." She thought of Griggs's almost-toothless smile. "Funny, but I never really felt sorry for him. Not really."

Donald opened the door, and winter filled the apartment again. "O.K. I still don't get it, but you're all right and he's gone, so I'm going too. I'll be at my place here in town tonight if you. . . ." He stepped outside without finishing the sentence.

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Pamela stood and picked up his coat. "Don't forget this," she said, but the door had already closed.

Cute. Now he had an excuse to come back before leaving for the city in the morning.

She sat down again with the coat on her lap. As it warmed her, the thought came to her that Donald might have left it for another reason. Maybe he wanted to ease his conscience. After all, Griggs needed it more than he did.

She started to talk herself out of it, but decided not to listen. Then she went into the bedroom to take off her skirt and blouse and to put on clothes more suitable for a walk in the cold dusk.

Hours passed. First her car refused to start because she had forgotten to turn off the headlights when she'd come home. By the time she found a neighbor who would give her a jump start, it was eight o'clock and she was starving. That, in turn, made her realize that Griggs had taken no food with him, so she drove to the Burger Shack and bought cheeseburgers and fries from the drive-through window. Then she had to drive to the library and walk from there, as she had on Saturday. It was almost nine when she began crossing the bridge, running from one white pool of artificial light to the next. The river below was so black that it looked like a bottomless pit, and when she reached the levee path, she knew that she would have to get used to that kind of darkness quickly. There were no lights here.

As she left the path and began to make her way down the slope to the Kaw, she felt cold beyond anything she had even imagined on Saturday, cold beyond belief. Her right hand was knotted into a fist around the crumpled neck of the fast-food sack, and her left arm was crimped around the wadded bundle of Donald's coat. Despite her gloves, her fingers were numb. She was shivering so hard that she was afraid she would fall because her feet wouldn't touch ground where she wanted.

Soon she did fall, not because she was shivering, but because she hadn't been able to see the line where the dead grass gave way to rocks. She landed on her hip, holding the sack high, and knew she would have a bruise in the morning. She struggled up, and then continued more slowly, even though slowness made the cold sharper still.

The farther down the slope she went, the darker and colder it became. She could see some of the lights of downtown Lawrence above the river's

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south bank, but the broad black stretch that separated her from them made them seem a world away. The town was a memory; she was somewhere else now. Except for the noise of the Kaw as it rushed over the dam, the only things she was aware of were the mingled smells of dead fish, rotten wood, and smoke.

Pamela was afraid that she was going beyond stupidity now. Why hadn't she at least brought a flashlight?

But this was the last time. Once she did this, she would never come here or even speak to a bum again. . . .

The fire appeared as a sudden blaze of orange as she came down under the Vermont Street Bridge. It was burning in the same place as two days before, on a flat spot under the Massachusetts Street Bridge, and the same three men were squatting around it. Pamela paused for a long moment, gathering the courage to approach them and ask about Griggs.

Then she saw that on the concrete slope above the fire, in the shadows where the dancing light hardly reached, an emaciated man with a potbelly lay on his back. He was naked.

One of the men at the fire shifted position, and Pamela saw that he was sitting on a lumpy trash bag and wearing a sweatshirt printed with the words JAYHAWK BASKETBALL.

Then she was running at the flames, hearing her own scream over the roar of the river. The three men looked up just as she reached them, and all she saw as she kicked were dull eyes just beginning to widen in surprise or fear. Her bootheel hit the man with the sweatshirt in the shoulder, knocking him over, and then her momentum carried her into the fire. She kicked furiously, scattering sparks and sticks and then clothes from the trash bag, and the three men fell over each other trying to run away to the east.

Pamela stopped kicking when they were out of range, and then she stood panting, glaring after them in the weak light given off by the scattered chunks of burning driftwood. The three of them were now beside the falls where the river went over the dam, looking at her through a cloud of mist. The man in the sweatshirt started back toward her.

"Get out of here, or I'll kill you!" she screamed.

The man stopped and shouted, but all Pamela could make out was, ". . . do nothin'!" Then he turned away, and he and his companions walked off downstream, huddling together for warmth. A moment later

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they were out of sight, swallowed by darkness.

Pamela was still clutching her paper bag and Donald's coat. She dropped the bag and snatched up a driftwood torch, then ran up onto the hard slope where Griggs lay.

He smiled at her. Even in the torch's poor light, she could see that he had no teeth left.

She laid the torch on the concrete and knelt beside the derelict, covering him with Donald's coat and tucking it under his back and buttocks. Then she leaned down with her mouth next to his ear so that he could hear her over the noise of the falls. "I'm going to carry you," she said, trying to sound reassuring. "You'll be fine." Her lips brushed his earlobe, and it felt as cold as frozen meat.

As she slid her arms under him, he gripped her shoulder and whispered, "I ain't cold, ma'am." Even so close, she could barely make out the words.

"It's below zero," she said, "and those men stole your clothes."

Grigg's head wobbled back and forth. "I gave 'em to 'em, 'cause one of 'em said he'd take my place. He was lyin', though." The derelict's breathing was becoming more labored with each word.

Pamela shifted from a kneel to a squat. "Well, you have a good coat now," she said. "It'll keep you warm until we get to the hospital." She began to lift.

He struck her twice, in the nose and mouth, and the cold made the pain intense beyond the force of the blows. Recoiling, she pulled her arms out from under him and put her hands over her face. She was crying now, and didn't want to. It wasn't her fault that the stupid old bastard didn't want to live.

Her gloves stuck to her cheeks for an instant as she lowered her hands, because her tears were turning to ice almost as soon as she cried them. If she didn't stop, her eyelashes would freeze together. She could hardly see as it was, because the torch was dying along with the rest of the driftwood.

She leaned down to speak into Griggs's ear again. "I'm trying to help you, damn it." She hated that he was hearing her sob.

He began to whisper again, and she had to remove her hat and put her ear next to his mouth to hear him at all. His lips brushed her earlobe as hers had his. "I tol' you," he said. "No doctors. No Salvation Army. No nothin'."

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Pamela steeled herself and put her arms under him again. She would be damned if she would let him die. "Think, Mr. Griggs. If you were gone, what would people here do when they needed a sin-eater?"

His chuckle was a soft puff against her cold cheek. "They're gonna hafta take care o' their own sins now. I'm the last."

Pamela began to lift again, trying to do it gradually so that he wouldn't feel it until it was too late to fight her. "That's why you've got to stick around. You're the only one who can do it for them."

"No teeth. Can't chew."

"We'll get you some dentures." She lifted him from the concrete, and he struck her in the face again, harder than before.

Almost blind from tears and pain, she let him down and pressed her cheek against his. As cold as she was, she could still feel his beard stubble scraping her skin. "At least let me take you home so you can die warm," she said miserably.

The wobble of Griggs's head was barely perceptible this time. "I got t' be by m'river," he breathed. "Yessir, stick close to your river, an' everthing'll be fine."

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Pamela pressed closer, holding him tight. His shallow breathing stopped briefly, and then he drew in a long shuddering breath.

"Best chicken an' rolls I ever ate, ma'am," he murmured, and let out the breath. He didn't take another.

Pamela stayed there another minute and then pulled her arms out from under him, losing one of her gloves in the process. As she stood, she felt the ice of her tears crackle in his stubble.

She looked down at him for a few moments, barely able to see the dull gleam of his eyes, and finally stooped to pull Donald's coat away from him. Her bare fingers brushed his chest. There was a warm spot just below his breastbone.

She dropped the coat on the concrete, then removed her other glove and walked back toward the river until she found the paper bag of cheeseburgers and fries. A smoldering stick had burned a black hole into it, but the food was undamaged. She took it back to Griggs.

The burgers were cold, but otherwise not bad. The fries were another matter. Fortunately, though, the boy at the drive-through window had thrown in a couple of packets of ketchup that made them tolerable. All in all, Pamela decided, she had eaten worse meals. When she had finished the

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last morsel, she remembered that she still had one mint left in her coat pocket. It cracked and crumbled in her mouth, tasting sharp and cool and perfect.

She cleaned up the excess grease and ketchup with a napkin, then retrieved her gloves and hat. She was starting to shiver again, and she didn't want to catch cold. As an afterthought, she put Donald's coat over her own and stuffed the trash from her meal into one of its pockets. Then she searched among the scattered clothes from the trash bag until she found two shirts that, together, would cover Griggs's body.

After covering him, she left. There was no point in staying longer and getting even colder just to mutter some meaningless prayers. She had already said good-bye in the only way that meant anything to him.

Climbing the levee warmed her, and when she reached the bridge walkway, she strode briskly, without hurrying, toward the haloed buildings of central Lawrence. After she retrieved her car, she would drive to the east side of town to see Donald. He might be in bed by now, but that didn't matter. He would have to get used to some changes if they were to live together.

She gazed down at the black Kaw and listened to it rush eastward. Maybe moving to Kansas City wouldn't be so bad. The confluence of the Kaw and the Missouri was practically downtown, and Donald would probably agree to an apartment nearby. There were a lot of sinners in that area.

Maybe they could even follow the Missouri to St. Louis, and from there the Mississippi could take them almost anywhere. After all, even the ocean currents carried water from her river. She would be able to see or smell it there, or to taste it in the spray.

Pamela looked up again and fixed her eyes on a single distant light. The dark knot of sin nestled still and warm in her belly, like a patient child waiting to be born.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Twistor, John Cramer William Morrow, $18.95

. . . aptly placed in historical context.

THERE'S AN irrational feeling out there in the field that the truly "hard-science" SF novel should be encouraged. It's irrational not because a good book of its kind isn't intrinsically desirable as reading, but because the essential motive for the encouragement isn't literary. It's political, and is often expressed by persons who have no intention of reading such a book. They just want it around.

Furthermore, it's a pretty sure bet that only a minority of those who do read it will read all of it; they'll read the entire plot, to the best of their ability to grasp the author's intentions for it, but they'll skip over the science parts. Or skim through them. Only a dedicated and appropriately educated few will actually play with the suppositional science in its details, receiving that special benefit to which the author devoted most of the ingenuity involved in its creation.

So most of the "audience" for such a piece of work is actually an audience for its existence, rather than its essence. Why is this? Well, as noted, many of us can't really handle the science to the point where we can truly interact with it. And many of us — perhaps many more of us — feel we don't really have time for this genre of SF when there are so many others more readily accessible to our taste.

It's different now from the way it was when Hal Clement worked essentially for the readers of *Astounding Science Fiction* Magazine, when *ASF* largely *was* SF and the *ASF* audience consisted largely of knowledgeable technophiles. It's different specifically because in those mid-century days you couldn't call yourself an insider SF fan if you didn't keep up with what was appearing in the *Astounding*, and you couldn't in all good conscience resist making the effort to grasp

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what Clement (and his few peers in his genre) put together. When Clement played his game, that month — or those months — it was the only game in town.

You want to remember that at that time, systematically published newsstand science fiction wasn't yet twenty years old.*

Even at the height of *ASF*dom, probably any number of the readers had to hump and stretch to get the full flavor of what Clement did. But just making the effort was enough to offer the pleasure of validating oneself as a solid member of the community.

The science fiction part of the community, recall, was founded on Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* mode first, and second on the "superscience" genre that had made the *Astounding* of the early 1930s a serious factor in the field — and established superscience whiz-kid John W. Campbell, Jr., as a star second only to the effulgent luminescence of E.E. Smith, PhD in chemistry and original begettor.

Gernsback had venerated science and technology. He published for those aware that a new age was sweeping all human culture into a time of vast, permanent, highly desirable change on this planet . . . and, in the natural course of this technological expansion, would explore and exploit the other bodies in our Solar System. Smith and Campbell opened the entire Universe, with their vastly-faster-than-light propulsion systems, tractor and pressor beams, disintegrator rays, and other appurtenances that Gernsback bitterly dismissed as "mere fantasy." And "mere" fantasy is pretty much what all that continues to be in the light of even latter-day science, but what it was, and is, is an uninhibitedly wholehearted embrace of the *promise* of science.

Campbell turned into a quite different literary figure when he began editing at *ASF* in the late '30s, but he brought the superscience *geist* with him and never failed to keep it alive.*

Campbell, even before he found Heinlein and Asimov, Sturgeon, van Vogt and del Rey, C.L. Moore

* *Nor was reliably periodical newsstand fantasy even middle-aged, either.* F&SF, *founded in 1949, has been in existence for well more than half the lifetime of what has compelled me to espouse the (quasisatisfactory) term "speculative fiction."*

**Not only did* ASF *become the permanent home of E.E. Smith to the end of his days, a respected and justly beloved figure, but Campbell's eventual promulgation of "psionics," a magical technology based on an undiscovered science, is clearly the persistence of a glorious infatuation.*

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and Fritz Leiber, had L. Ron Hubbard introduced into his magazines, and nurtured de Camp, Simak, Kuttner and the rest of the inner circle who created "Modern" Science Fiction, had become a very different sort of prosaist as Don A. Stuart. Through Stuart, Campbell spoke in a moody, *fin de siecle* voice that chanted of human glory but also of vast historical turnings of the wheel that evoke the ultimate chapters of *The Time Machine* and the inevitable chill of entropy. For those of you who missed it, the same general mode is preserved in the better episodes of the original *Star Trek* series; sociological, philosophical, and concerned much more with what we will find than with how we will get there.

But it must have been with a glad cry of satisfaction that Campbell discovered Clement. The superscience writing style, as distinguished from the motive for superscience, had been played-out for him since 1934 or 5. There was nothing new in it for him ever since it had moved the Magellanic Clouds into close proximity with Mountainside, N.J., and in a sense his Modern science fiction* was a way of bending over backwards from it. But it's indicative that Campbell was one of the most rigorously Protestant persons ever actively to promote atheism. What Clement, *sui generis*, offered him — and his readers, and us, their cultural descendants — is a kind of fiction totally compatible both with hard-core Modern science fiction and with superscience.

Superscience is play with science. So is Clement-style SF. But Clement plays by creating dramatized genuine applied-science situations as a background for sociological speculation. If the science holds up, the sociology is valid; vice-versa, if the way these people live in their outlandish physical setting seems convincing, then the validity of the science-reporting is established. Clement's equivalent of a landing-party from the *Enterprise* — the human viewpoint character in *Mission of Gravity*, for instance — finds not only an exotic culture it must deal with, but a culture whose biology is conditioned by a physics that compels far more than a bit of costume design and a cleverly latexed visage pulled over the face and mind of a human actor.

Thus the great game for Clement's readers, and thus the conduit whereby what James Blish was first to call the "hard-science" story conveys a great part of our past into our hearts and minds today.

* *which came to an end in the middle 1950s.*

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It's a part of our past that many now have deliberately turned away from. There's no overt connection to the 1960s "New Wave,"* for instance, and thus to many modern forms. Although "Cyberpunk" could be defined as a refiguring of superscience, the community as a whole these days tends to think it favors a "literary" approach to SF (By "literary," it often means work aggressively extolling resemblances to traditional "little magazine" descriptive-fiction in its forms, and also in the hortatory manner with which those forms are presented. But that's another essay.) This means: To feel at the forefront or at least solidly in the ranks these days, one must regard hard-science fiction as quaint.

But those antibodies in our psychic systems indicate past exposure to endemic nostalgia. And the logic of assertively maintaining an identifiable literature of our own to be pioneers in, bearing only a resemblance to any other, calls for maintaining tokens of a bent for science. These two factors are synergized in us, and thus my first paragraph at the head of this column.

Put it another way: Not too many of us want to read hard-science SF, and not too many of us want to publish it, but most of us do want people to write it.

Thus we value Robert Forward, in particular for *Dragon's Egg*, and Charles Sheffield and Larry Niven, and such Arthur C. Clarke works as *Rendezvous With Rama* and *The Fountains of Paradise* which touch on the genuine Clement mode. The archetypal Sheffield works, and the Clarkes cited, of course also meld into "space-science fiction," which might for our present purposes be described as a polite form of Clement.

And we were struck by James P. Hogan when he first appeared, because he had moved Clement a step. That is, he invented his science, but then spoke of it with absolute rigor — "*IF* this behavior of the Universe were to exist, then the following consequences would inevitably occur. . . ." And a large portion of the remainder of his book would show the effect on the lives of believably capable people in a readily grasped environment, for instance our own.

This is in fact a harking-back to frank superscience at least as much as it is an evolution from Clement. It's very much like what Campbell did with "psionics," barring the air of easy miracle. It's distinguishable as a mode of its own because of the

* *although the earliest form of New Wave SF is totally definable in terms of its 180-degree antiCampbellianism*

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terms in which it's couched; gritty, as down-to-Earth as possible even when the Earth may be subject to motions and other levitations never measured by Isaac Newton, and, we note, a certain sterotypy of characterization and scenario. Not a terminal stereotypy. Hogan — and most of those who write like Hogan — is often charming, significantly evocative of the actual human condition, and at times poetic in his imaginative constructs. This entire school is characterized by prose very much on a level with what was considered quite good enough in Modern times; but it is characterizable in that way. Unlikely, but possible, is the notion that the pressure of nostalgia demands it be written in that way.

Thus, *Twistor* by John Cramer.

Twistor (that's with one "o" and no "e" at all) is the first considerable fiction work of the man who heads the nuclear physics laboratory at the University of Washington and writes the science column for *Analog*, which is what Campbell ultimately re-named *Astounding*. Cramer, a charming and impressively thoughtful man whose daughter, Cathryn Kramer, is a promising SF editor, is responding to the urgings of David Hartwell, Morrow's SF editor and arguably in many other ways now a notable steward of SF's traditions and destinies.

This book originates, then, not only from a scientist well up in his profession but also from deeply felt and thoroughly incorporated SF traditions. *Twistor* is not some casual by-blow; this is our legitimate offspring. And it is as handsome and well-formed a work of its kind as anyone could ask for.

Precisely of its kind. Its science is invented, the consequences of the invention are rigorous in detail, and there is that leavening of stereotypy.

Define terms:

The science premise derives from the abstrusest regions of contemporary theoretical physics, which left "common sense" behind forever at about the time the memory of the late John Campbell became preserved largely in the names of a couple of awards and the increasingly unmonitored memories of the elder statesmen among SF writers. There is "shadow matter" accompanying the matter we can touch, and by operating the proper machine, we can "rotate" into "shadow universes" — several of them. Once in them, we find them totally real, with real resources to be explored and exploited, and rotated really back into our universe.

The sense of rigor derives from Cramer's ingenuity in finding un-

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expected, and charming, ways to show us aspects of those universes — particularly the one in which a youngish scientist and two bright children are accidentally rotated into a hollow in a tree many orders of magnitude larger than a Sequoia. That's the shadow universe in which the bulk of the extraterrestrial action occurs, and in it things are captivatingly like-but-unlike things in our world . . . captivatingly better.

The stereotypy of the scenario occurs as we discover a supervising scientist corrupted entirely by greed and fear, whose machinations put the good guys in that fix, and who almost prevents a happy denouement for the boy-meets-girl subplot. And the stereotypy of the prose style is pure Modern median — Raymond F. Jones or George O. Smith could have signed for it readily. There are visible attempts, especially in the opening chapter, to be a bit more lyrical than that, but Cramer, or an editor, had the good sense soon to display a lyricism of image rather than a flowering of adjectives. Lyrical images are something this mode is often surprisingly good at.

The beginning of the book displays a more than acceptable proficiency at discussing hardware, the procedures and professional dialogues of the boy scientist and the at first cautious girl scientist, and the theoretical foundation for some increasingly bizzare behavior by the hardware. The sequences in which the boy works his way back from his entrapment in the shadow universe are equally charmingly workaday, in that same manner Will F. Jenkins used to show the hero convincingly building a technologically overpowering device out of a bucket of water, a belt-buckle and some ten-penny nails bailing-wired to a galena crystal. There are, in fact, some scenes remarkably evocative of Jenkins's ("Murray Leinster"'s) "The Mole Pirates," with the phantomized hero operating in what is "underground" from our point of view. That corona of quotation marks is well- and not at all invidiously earned.

What appears to be Cramer's own — and interesting for several good reasons — is the Swiss Family Robinson touch.

The premier Robinsoniad of this literature is John Campbell's own superscience *The Moon is Hell,* in which a party of engineers stranded on the Moon without food, water or air, contrives to manufacture its own well-stocked YMCA. But Cramer has brought children into this metagenre, and, in addition to a tree house, a "treebird" who makes a very good entrance onstage, a ferocious but ultimately overcom-

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able "tiger," and — almost but not quite too much of a good thing — a "kitten." All of these are built (to my mind) impeccably into a thoroughly realized ecology. One wants to go back to it, and be as a child in delving farther into its beckoning vistas.

Now, that's striking. *Twistor* shares with many Clement works this feature of being perhaps intended for younger readers, without compromising with us less innocent ones. But Clement, the master to whom all point automatically when saying "hard-science" perhaps loosely, is not what the world calls a scientist. He is, by career, by choice, by nature, a prep-school science teacher. And perhaps in some way because of that, he almost uniquely plays the game by no rules of his own invention.

Yet, still, one cannot endlessly parse genres. If there is *a* "hard-science" genre, John Cramer has excellently fulfilled our needs in that respect, and one looks forward to the sequel. This book is what science fiction is demonstrably all about. The rest of what is done in SF has more to do with the fiction.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Journey to Fusang, William Sanders, Pocket, paper, 310pp, $3.95

SOMTOW SUCHARITKUL did it splendidly with *The Aquiliad*. John Maddox Roberts did it powerfully with *King of the Wood*. Heaven knows they weren't the first to invent an alternate American history in which somebody *else* discovered this continent. It takes a lot of gall for a new novelist to tread in the same territory. But Sanders dared — and out of sheer onery *fun*, *Journey to Fusang* earns its own place in that tradition.

The Mongols have ruled Europe for generations, and when Finn, the Irish narrator, has to flee because of various less-than-legal activities, there aren't many options. He comes to America on a slave ship that delivers sacrificial victims to the Aztecs in exchange for gold, but a fortunate shipwreck (it worked for *Ben-Hur*, after all) puts him and some companions in — well, not New Orleans, but the Arab equivalent.

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From there he gets caught up in saving the New World from a would-be conqueror, meeting Apaches and Ninjas along the way.

Did I mention that this book is funny? Sometimes *too* funny, in fact, since Sanders proves himself willing to throw out credibility for the sake of a cheap joke, like having Chinese children in San Francisco chant the lyrics to the dumbest Beach Boys song ever written. This is especially jarring because most of the time he seems to want us to believe in and care about his characters. In short, while *Fusang* is mostly good comedy, occasionally it gets confused and acts like a Xanth or Hitchhiker joke book. Maybe those will be the best bits for you. What the heck. I had a great time reading it, and unless you're obnoxiously serious about your literary forays, so will you.

Deep Quarry, John E. Stith, Berkley, paper, 140pp, $3.50

Most cross-genre novels aren't. The romance writer who tries to write a "science fiction romance" usually ends up writing a romance with spaceshps. The fantasy western is probably going to be funny whether you mean it to be or not.

But the sf mystery is an exception. Maybe this is because so many hard-sf stories already have the same structure as almost all mysteries. Some casual question is identified early in the tale, and the rest of the story is devoted to finding the answer. How did Fred Bliss end up dead on the floor of his son's bathroom? Why does the third moon of Ekbavar have only a tenth of the expected mass?

Still, it takes real skill to combine both genres well. The sf mystery must do all the work of science fiction — creating a plausible and interesting world and characters whose actions and motives reflect that milieu. And it must do all the work of detective fiction — creating a plausible and interesting crime, a sympathetic inquisitor, and a complex structure that reveals all the pertinent information without exposing the causal connections.

Both assignments are hard enough. But the sf mystery must combine them so that the solution to the mystery *depends* on the science fictional milieu. Otherwise, the reader is left asking questions like, "What was all that stuff about the third moon of Ekbavar? This story could all have happened in Nebraska."

Asimov showed us how to do it right. Few sf writers have been dumb enough — or arrogant enough, or just plain good enough, even to attempt the feat again. John Stith attempts it, but he ain't dumb, and — I've met him — he's no way

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arrogant. He's just plain good.

Stith's new sf mystery, *Deep Quarry*, taps one of the deepest wells in science fiction — the discovery of the ancient secrets of a sentient race. Ever since Andre Norton's *Galactic Derelict*, I've loved stories like this, where archaeologists discover an object that has no business being where it is. Stith creates a fascinating bunch of aliens to share this universe; the detective-narrator, "Bug-eye" Takent, won his nickname because he has a penchant for getting along with — and helping — various aliens, still called "bug-eyed monsters" by human bigots.

The crime that initially gets Takent involved, though, is simple enough. Somebody's stealing valuable artifacts from an archaeological site. The problem is that once Takent gets on the case, people keep dying. What's most disturbing is that it's Takent who kills them. Since he's never killed anyone before, it bothers him. But that's no surprise — this is a Stith novel, so even a wise-cracking detective has a soul. Like the best mystery writers, Stith seems incapable of writing a shallow character.

Eventually, though, the initial crime take a back seat to a much bigger sf mystery relating to a terrible secret buried at the site of the archaeological dig. it's sense-of-wonder storytelling at its best, with enough danger to keep me reading long past my bedtime, just as I did with Andre Norton — and Agatha Christie — when I was twelve. The difference is that now, being middle-aged, I've also come to value characterization and mature social vision in the fiction I read. *Deep Quarry* has all that, too.

Come on. You've been good. You *deserve* to read *Deep Quarry*. And when you're through, go back and read Stith's earlier novel *Memory Blank*. Proof positive that *Deep Quarry* isn't a fluke. Stith can do it every time.

Spirits of Cavern and Hearth, M. Coleman Easton, (St. Martin's, cloth, 294pp, $16.95)

Yarkol, a physician serving many peasants and villagers, is suddenly "soulstruck," a terrible disease that leaves him as smooth-faced and sexually incapable as a child. He is expelled from his clan; his wives and children regard him as dead. Worse, the disease makes it impossible for him to stay in a house for very long, forcing him into a nomadic life, and it marks his face so that all who see him know immediately what has happened to him.

He soon runs into Chirudak tribesman, and discovers that *they* call his condition "godstruck." Certainly he now can see what he never saw before — all the hobs and sprites and

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Chet Williamson wrote the subtle and polished horror tale "Eternal Ties" (February 1989). Here is a change of pace, a magical and not entirely serious story about Fayhorn and the quest for a griffin.

Fayhorn and the Golden Nest

By Chet Williamson

FAYHORN LOOKED AT the crucible and sighed. The experiment had not worked. The iron was still iron.

Not that Fayhorn had really expected it to become gold, but at least, he thought, it could have had the courtesy to turn to copper, as it had many times before, along with lead, tin, and nickel. Although Fayhorn's lifelong quest was to turn base metals into gold, he had become inadvertently adept at turning base metals into other base metals. Still, selling the nickel and copper that he accidentally produced always put a few coins in his purse, enough to allow him to continue in his chosen and ancestral profession of wizardry and attempted alchemy, and to retain the services of Hopnard, who now came through the laboratory door, his slow, sad hound's eyes gazing hopefully upon his master.

"Anything?" Hopnard asked.

"Iron," said Fayhorn.

Hopnard thought for a moment. "You *started* with iron," Hopnard said.

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"That's correct."

"Then . . . it *wasn't* anything."

"That is *also* correct. You have a gift for cutting through to the meat of a situation."

"Please don't say meat, master. It only makes things worse." Hopnard sat down and rubbed his already flat stomach. Constitutionally built like a carrot with legs, the starvation diet necessitated by Fayhorn's recent dry spell had done nothing for Hopnard's physique. He now looked like a carrot *stick* with legs. "We must have money for food," he moaned, passing his bony fingers through his wheaten hair.

"Yes," Fayhorn agreed, emptying the crucible into the slop bucket. "But in order to have money, I must be able to perform magic."

"Well, why *can't* you?" Hopnard cried in an atypical burst of temper, which he immediately recanted. "I mean to say, with due respect, master, there was a time when you could have made ortolans fly through the window by the dozens, strip off each other's feathers, drag a pan into the oven, hop in it, cover themselves with flour, arrange themselves in neat rows — and all *we* had to do was take 'em out when they were cooked and season to taste."

Fayhorn shook his craggy head in frustrated rage so that his white locks shimmered like a snowy pine in sunlight. "It's this age we live in," he growled, dropping into a chair. "'Magic thrives on *belief*.' Ranasageus's First Law of Thaumaturgy, and Ranasageus knew where-the-hell-of he spoke. These damned humanists are ruining wizardry. No one comes to me anymore for spells or charms. Even the peasants no longer have that simple faith of children that made them such easy marks when I was younger. Go find me one peasant or merchant or noble today who believes in demons or trolls or elves or basilisks. . . . Come *back*, Hopnard! That was only a *rhetorical* command."

Hopnard nodded dully and sat down across from his master. "So then," he said slowly, puzzling it out, "if people believed in magic things, then the kind of magic things that you used to do and worked would work again, and then they'd come and buy magic things from you?"

"Ranasageus put it more succinctly, but yes."

"Then . . . does that mean we can't get any more copper to sell?"

Fayhorn's verbal riposte was prevented by a burst of laughter from the street. Although universal laughter was not unheard of in the town, it

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was rare enough that both master and man stepped to the window to find its cause.

Out in the street a dozen men were gathered around old Woolwhisker, a decaying yet agile ancient who had been a shepherd, some said, ever since there were sheep. His tanned and leathered face was even more lined by a frown, and the men were laughing in such a way that Fayhorn quickly deduced that the shepherd was the source of their merriment.

"It's *true*, dammit! I tell ya it *is!*" Woolwhiskers insisted, using his shepherd's crook for punctuation on the leg of a slow-moving and now-limping youth. "I *seen* it!"

"You saw what, shepherd?" inquired Fayhorn gently, not wishing to be on the receiving end of a hurled crook.

"He saw a *griffin!*" yelled one of the men hysterically, jumping deftly aside as the crook swished through the air where he had been standing. "He saw a bird of which there *ain't* none of!" the rustic went on, giggling all the while.

"Naw!" put in another. "It ain't a bird; it's a *lion* with *wings!* Roaaaahr! Look out, Woolly!"

This gibe brought a continuous flurry of chortles, stopped momentarily when Woolwhisker caught the mocker a good one on the tailbone.

"It is not a lion with wings," Fayhorn corrected professorially. "A griffin is a mytho . . . *ahem!* . . . a creature with the front parts of an eagle and the nether part of a lion."

"What's he do with all them parts, Your Wizardship?" joshed one of the serfs. "Make soup?"

Surely, thought his companions, this was the finest jest of all, and they cackled like evil sisters.

"Ignorant louts!" cried Fayhorn with some of the spirit that had made him the most feared and respected man in the village in his salad days. "You mock at things you know nothing of!"

"Right!" agreed Hopnard, nodding.

"We know nothing of 'em because they ain't no such beast of which to *know!*" responded a scoffer.

"Hell they ain't! I seen it!" said the shepherd.

"You seen a hawk or somethin'."

"It was a *griffing*, you young snip!"

"Formerly found in Scythia," Fayhorn went on as if addressing a class

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full of naughty students, "the griffin guards its nest, which, reports have it, is filled with virgin gold."

"Virgin gold!" hooted Peavey the slop-hauler. "Now there you go, Woolly; you go follow your little griffin and bring back its gold! *Then* we'llbelieve ya! As for me, I'll settle for the virgins!"

The hysterics this sally was certain to bring forth were aborted by a deep and strangely accented voice that no one in the village had ever before heard. "There *is* a griffin," it said. "And I have journeyed a thousand miles to find it."

All heads turned to see this new participant in the verbal revels, and all laughter ceased as they took him in. He was a tall, angular man with strongly Oriental features and skin the color of weathered parchment. Although he appeared even older than Fayhorn, his eyes were young, and a youthful smile creased the skin behind his white, wispy mustaches. In his right hand he carried a walking stick with a carved dragon's head, and in his left he held the reins of a weary horse burdened with large, leathern saddlebags. His robe was humble with patches and dust, but beneath the wear, Fayhorn could see the remnants of rich embroidery and cloth of gold. When the man opened his mouth again, he exposed teeth magically white.

"There is a griffin," he repeated. "I know, for I have followed it a long time."

Despite the ancient's regal bearing, the dozen ruffians slowly began to giggle again. The giggles became chuckles, the chuckles laughs, the laughs guffaws.

"How'dja do that, old man?" queried Limekin the dung-dauber. "Sniff its droppings?"

At this the twelve exploded in hilarity, holding their sides until Simptooth the fat-renderer had to be carried by his fellows into the tavern at the end of the street, where they drank and laughed until evening at the credulity of graybeards and their simpleminded servants.

But Fayhorn saw far more than an old dotard in the wizened face of the Oriental. "Sir," he said to him, "shake the dust from your robe and come into my house to rest and drink. And you, Woolwhisker, I think both this gentleman and I would speak further with you of your discovery."

The Oriental nodded a gracious acceptance, and Woolwhisker, delighted to be believed, was through Fayhorn's door in less time than it

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takes to tell of it. Hopnard led the ancient's steed to the tiny stable behind the wizard's house, then hauled a bucket of water from the well and went inside.

The three old men were sitting in Fayhorn's woven willow chairs, and Fayhorn glared at his man. "What is *that?*" he asked, gesturing toward the bucket in Hopnard's hand.

"Water."

"Water?"

"You said something about drinking?"

"I would not offer my guests less than wine, Hopnard, as you well know. Now go to the tavern and purchase some."

Hopnard thought for a moment. "With what?" he finally asked.

"With *haste,* fool," his master replied.

"One moment," the Oriental said, taking a wrinkled purse from his sash and shaking out some coins. "Allow me to buy the wine."

"Oh sir," said Fayhorn, "I could not. . . ."

"Please," said the traveler. "I must pay in kind for what is rendered. It is my way." Without another word, he dropped some coins into Hopnard's hand, who gazed at them with longing and looked at his master, who blushed briefly but nodded. Hopnard was off in a flash.

"My name is Fayhorn, and I am a wizard. This is Woolwhisker, who tends sheep. And . . . ?"

"My name is Sum Lin. I am from the east."

"Sum Lin?" Fayhorn asked. "Not the Sum Lin who wrote. . . ."

"*The Book of Beasts!* That is I. I and my family, back to nine generations, have recorded the descriptions and habits of every beast and bird to walk or fly the earth we know. The first son of each Sum Lin is also named Sum Lin, and takes on the task." The old man's face grew suddenly solemn. "When there *is* a son."

"You are childless?" the wizard asked.

"I am. The last Sum Lin am I, and the last of the beasts for *The Book of Beasts* is the griffin, a creature no Sum Lin has ever seen."

"The griffin," said Fayhorn, "as you have just seen by the reaction of the village idiots outside, is believed by many to be mythical."

"So was the mermecolion, the basilisk, the catoblepas. But Sum Lin found them all."

"The catoblepas?" Fayhorn said. "That is not in my volume of your work."

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"Your edition is early. My father found the catoblepas in Ethiopia in his old age, a year before I began my own work. Every beast in the book has been observed firsthand by Sum Lin. All myth springs from truth."

"And all magic from belief," Fayhorn murmured.

The Oriental's eyebrows raised. "Your pardon?"

"Nothing, nothing. But you say you've tracked a griffin here? A real one?"

"For seven years have I followed its trail, and grown old on the journey. But the end is near. The craggy mountains above your town are perfect for its nesting place, rough and inaccessible to all those but the truly dedicated. And now this man says that he has seen the creature. . . ."

"I sure did, Your Lordship," piped up Woolwhisker, who had been sitting between the two men, his mouth hanging open like an empty market basket.

"Please," Sum Lin said, airily waving a hand, "I am no lord, but a simple scholar seeking truth."

"Oh . . . all right, then, Your . . . Scholarship. I seen it for sure. I was up north tending the flock, when I run out of water, so I left the pasture — oh, a stream runs through it, but the damn sheep piss in it as much as they drink from it — and clumb up into the rocks a ways where the stream starts up there, when I hear this sound like a raven, sort of, but like the biggest, fattest, meanest raven you ever heard. I look up, and comin' right at me is the damndest thing I ever seen. It looks like a big eagle, its wings spread farther than four men end to end. Well, I didn't waste no time, I tell ya. I dove for the ground fast's could be. Bunged my head, too — here, see the cut?"

Sum Lin nodded. "I have an ointment for that. Please, continue."

"Well, I looked up after I felt the wind of it woosh over me, and I swear on my father's grave if the bastard didn't have a lion's ass and legs; and what's more, it had one of my sheep! It turned around in the air so's I could see it all plain, and I knew right away from the stories my old mum told me that it was one of them griffings, even though Mum had always said they wasn't such things. So I run down to town quick as I can, and none of them bastards believe me!"

"I believe you," Sum Lin said quietly. "So it was just within hours that you saw the beast."

"You betcha."

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"Then there is no time to waste." The scholar rose to his feet. "Master Fayhorn, would this be of enough interest to you that you would consider accompanying me on this last leg of my quest?"

Fayhorn stood and bowed deeply. "I would be honored, Sum Lin. My soul has need of magic today, and it would be a delight to prove wrong the disbelieving citizens of this town. My servant will join us as well."

As if hearing his cue, Hopnard came through the door, bearing a full wineskin. "Oh, thank you, master! I haven't had wine in I don't know how long!"

"The wine can wait, Hopnard. We go in search of the griffin."

"If this fine shepherd," Sum Lin added silkily, "will guide us."

"Sorry, Your Scholarhood," said Woolwhisker, shaking his head, "but if you'd seen that bird haulin' that fat sheep around like an owl with a mouse, you wouldn't be so quick to go scurryin' after it. Like some devil outta Hell flyin' away a poor sinner, it was."

"Will you then at least show us where the place was?" asked Sum Lin. "You need accompany us no farther."

The shepherd's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Maybe I will, and maybe I won't. What about the gold?"

"Gold?" Sum Lin's response, thought Fayhorn, was suitably inscrutable. "What gold is this?"

"The virgin gold that them griffings are supposed to have in their nests, that's what gold. The gold they's supposed to guard."

Sum Lin shrugged. "I seek wisdom, not gold. If we should find some, it is only just that you should have a fair share."

Woolwhisker frowned and scratched a scab for a moment, then nodded. "I'll take ya. You just remember my share, now."

"Shall we take any gear?" Fayhorn asked.

"Everything we might need I have in my saddlebags," Sum Lin said, moving toward the door.

Hopnard watched as the three older men left the room. "Doesn't *anyone* want some wine?" he wailed, then followed.

The sun was low in the west by the time they reached the spot where Woolwhisker said he saw the creature. "Flew up there, it did," he told Sum Lin. "Up at that buncha rocks. Probably up there now chewin' the bones of my poor lost lamb. What virging gold you find won't scarce be enough to make up for its loss."

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"I would be surprised," Fayhorn said, "if the griffin's appetite was satisfied by only one sheep. Have you checked your flock recently?"

Woolwhiskers took only an instant to consider the possibilities, then tore down the hill, leaving behind a chuckling Fayhorn and a smiling Sum Lin. "I thank you," Sum Lin said. "His jabbering was a disagreeable counterpoint to the theme of my soon-to-be-fulfilled quest. Let us leave our mounts here and ascend by foot."

Hopnard climbed off his swaybacked mule and looked up at the rocks nervously. "Shouldn't we have a weapon or something?"

"Those who seek truth need have no fear," Sum Lin said.

"Well, maybe not where *you* come from, but. . . ."

"Silence, Hopnard!" commanded Fayhorn. "Drink some of that wine, and your fear will die soon enough."

Hopnard shuddered but obeyed. "Hope that's the *only* thing that's going to die around here . . . ," he said under his breath, then followed his master and Sum Lin as they picked their way across and up the jagged rocks.

"I have never . . . been this close . . . before," said Sum Lin between breaths. "A day behind, at times . . . but now . . . only an hour or two. . . . We shall . . . find it."

A short time later they saw the nest atop a wide plateau of stone. From where they stood below, they could see a curve of arc that constituted only perhaps a tenth of the whole, but that tenth was at least three yards long. It was composed of entire branches, bent and interwoven like a tangle of longbows. The branches were fresh, and green foliage hung from the ends of many of them, causing Sum Lin to observe excitedly, "The nest is new!"

Hopnard swallowed heavily. "Do we have to climb up there?"

"I don't think it will come down to *us*," Fayhorn answered. "Have some more wine, for God's sake." Again, Hopnard obeyed.

"Come," whispered Sum Lin, and began to climb, his speed belying his age.

When at last he pulled himself over the edge of the plateau, Fayhorn heard his gasp. "What is it? What's wrong?" he asked.

Sum Lin turned, grasped Fayhorn's arm, and drew him up beside him. "Look."

Fayhorn looked, and saw the nest, like a huge piecrust, its interior

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The griffin was huge. It filled the nest, sitting on hind legs covered with dense fur.

lined with a yellowish lemon filling that glowed in the dying sun like —

"*Gold,*" Fayhorn breathed in awe.

"Would . . . somebody help me . . . *please*! . . ." came Hopnard's voice from behind them, followed by the sound of his hand scrabbling at the loose stones on the plateau's rim.

Ignoring the servant, Fayhorn and Sum Lin walked toward the nest at a steady pace, due, at least on Fayhorn's part, to a fear that coming upon it too quickly would make it vanish. But soon they both were leaning over the low, fencelike edge of the nest, gazing down at its rippled and dully shining interior.

"Hello up there? . . . Gentlemen?" continued Hopnard's plea.

Fayhorn reached down and passed his fingers along the golden surface. His face narrowed. "What. . . ." He scraped at the surface, and yellow bits came away, clinging to his fingernails like clay.

At that moment a scream bit through the chilly air, and Fayhorn whipped his head around. "Hopnard?" he called hesitantly, and was relieved to see his servant's skinny fingers wiggling above the edge of the plateau. Then he felt the scholar's hand slip into his own and pull him toward a mass of rocks on the far side of the plateau.

"Come," barked Sum Lin. "We must hide!"

They had just crouched behind a boulder, when the air around them surged as in a whirlwind, and dust and small stones billowed up. When the cloud cleared, Fayhorn looked around the boulder.

The griffin was huge. It filled the nest, sitting on hind legs covered with dense yellow fur, muscled as though living trees moved and flexed beneath the skin. Its feet ended in dark claws as long as bayonets, but far thicker. Now it spread its vast golden wings against the dusk, folded them, and screamed again, so that something ripped and red fell from its terrible maw. Fayhorn's breath locked in his throat as he recognized it as what was left of Woolwhisker's head and upper body.

"I suggest we not make our presence known," he husked out to Sum Lin.

"A sound suggestion," the Oriental whispered, and Fayhorn, unable to

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take his eyes away from the shepherd's pitiful remains lying on the surface of what looked like molten gold, hoped that Hopnard had ceased his efforts to pull himself upward.

The head of the griffin came up, swiveled once, twice, so that Fayhorn could see the ears as large and curved as scimitars; the comb of scarlet spikes of feathers; the beak an Algerian hook on which to dangle giants; the long, barbed, and pointed tongue. It seemed a creature forged of blades.

As that thought came to Fayhorn, the wings opened once more, and the rows of pointed feathers looked like grim tiers of swords. The eyes flashed like metal, and the great head rolled again as if looking around the nest for something lost. The beast batted the shepherd's body with a fisted claw, then picked it up again in its beak, dropped it, prodded, picked it up, looked about with its mad eyes, dropped it again, over and over, reminding Fayhorn of a bird trying to feed its young, but with no young to feed.

At last the creature buffeted the dead morsel so roughly that it flew over the edge of the nest and flopped to a stop not ten feet from where Fayhorn crouched in horror, the shepherd's dead eyes looking into his own. He was only vaguely aware of the presence of Sum Lin beside him. The scholar's heavy breathing sounded far away, muffled by the harsh clucking sound the beast was now making.

But in a moment, it fell over onto its side, the crazed clucking slowly diminishing into a series of agonized groans, and its massive legs began to twitch. Then a cry more awful than any sound the creature had made before cut the cold air like a scythe. Its head and wings writhed, its legs thrust out savagely, and Fayhorn could see its flanks heaving, the great round abdomen lurching in and out as though in the grip of peristalsis. Then, in the dark cleft between the legs, the line of an orifice appeared, split, widened, until, with an even louder shriek, a thick fluid began to exude from the griffin's body.

In the last red light of the dying day, Fayhorn saw that the moist streamers were yellow, streaked with strands of crimson. They flowed out of the beast, spread over the earlier, dried exudation, puddled in the crevasses, filled the gaps until the thrashing beast seemed to be swimming in a pool of its own effluence. Its bright eyes flashed in pain, as its struggles threw gelatinous drops into the air and back down upon it. One of these landed on the rock just a few inches from Fayhorn, and he watched as a thin crust immediately formed over it.

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In another minute the copious flow of secretions had slowed to a trickle, and the exhausted beast lay still, its only movement the ponderous heaving of its sides.

When Fayhorn felt that his mouth could once again form words, he whispered to Sum Lin, "What do we do now?"

"Be patient," the ancient replied. "We may not leave while the creature is still here. It would mean our life. I hope your servant is wise enough to remain below."

Fayhorn made no answer. Hopnard's wisdom was one thing of which he was never certain, but he hoped for the best. Instead, the wizard held up his hand to show Sum Lin the flecks of golden debris on his nails. "Not gold," he said quietly.

"No. Certainly not gold. Pieces of unfertilized egg, perhaps, or mammalian ova, considering that its provenance is from the nether parts of this . . . hybrid creature." Sum Lin shook his head slowly. "Poor beast."

"Poor beast?" Fayhorn repeated unbelievingly. "It slaughtered Woolwhisker, and would do the same to us with no hesitation!"

"It needed meat, that was all. Meat to feed its young."

"What young? It spewed out muck instead of giving birth!"

"Of course. It is sterile, and has been for centuries. It would take that long for the legend to take root and spread."

"What legend?"

"The legend of the golden nest. This is how it began — someone seeing the nest filled with this hardened fluid, but not being able to get close enough to see that it was not gold." Sum Lin took a bit of the dried material from Fayhorn's fingers, spat on it, and rubbed, leaving only a yellow stain. "It would wash away in the rain, leaving nothing but the nest. And those who found it told themselves, no doubt, that the griffin had taken the gold away."

"No gold," Fayhorn sighed.

"No, no gold. But certainly a griffin. My entry will consist of a full physical description, and the fact that the observed griffin is undoubtedly a female, and probably the last of her species — childless and sterile." The old man smiled. "Much like her chronicler, it seems. But at least *my* quest is over. Now at last *I* am fulfilled."

They watched the darkness come. The griffin slept, but they dared not leave, as the only way down from the plateau was directly past the nest

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and within a few feet of the sleeping beast's head, and they feared to awaken it.

So they sat and shivered until dawn. Fayhorn slept fitfully, unnerved by the presence of both the griffin and the dead shepherd, and afraid that his snores would alert the beast. Sum Lin did not close his eyes once, but sat gazing at the stars with the look of a man who has never known weariness.

When the sun rose, the griffin rose with it, shook itself, turned around once, and looked at its nest, its great and frightful head hanging low. Then it stretched its wings and, with one deafening cry, leaped into the sky.

"It flies north," Sum Lin said, "eternally on the move, searching for a new place to build its empty nest." He sighed and stood, stretching his legs. "I suggest that we now leave, and see how your servant has passed the night."

They crossed the plateau and looked over the edge, where, on a ledge twenty feet below, Hopnard lay, his face against the rough stones. "Oh ye gods!" Fayhorn cried, filled with guilt and anguish.

Hopnard moved sluggishly, and hope surged through the wizard as he saw the man was not yet dead. The hope, however, was replaced by annoyed relief as Hopnard rolled over to reveal the empty wineskin upon which he had been sleeping.

"Oh . . . g'morning, master. I. . . . *Ow!*" Hopnard grabbed his head as though it were a living thing to be controlled. "Couldn't get down from here last night . . . didn't know *what* was happening up there with you and your friend, so I just stayed put, you know? Near my master and all. Drank the wine for sustenance . . . maybe a little too *much* wine, in retro . . . retro . . . looking at it now."

Their mounts were where they had left them, and they rode under a cloudy sky until they were a stone's throw from the town, where Sum Lin reined in his horse.

"We part here. I am old, and will be older still by the time I return to my country and write my final entry in *The Book of Beasts.*"

"Farewell, then, Sum Lin," said Fayhorn. "It has been an education. My belief in the fabled things of this world has increased. I wish the same were true of those strutting fools who mocked us."

"You can tell them of the griffin, can you not?"

"Oh, I can tell them, but they won't believe me. I can show them

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Woolwhisker's torn body, and they'll say it was wolves. I can show them the nest, and they'll say that I built it."

"You can show them the residue in the nest, can you not?" suggested the ancient.

A bolt of lightning tore through the sky to the north, followed by a rumble of thunder. Rain began to fall slowly, and Fayhorn chuckled. "The gods have just destroyed that possibility. No, the only thing that would prove the beast's existence to them would be gold. For they *know* I have none of that."

"A temporary situation, perhaps," said Sum Lin. "For since I must pay in kind for what is rendered, I must pay you for your aid in completing the work of not only my life, but of the life of every Sum Lin."

Fayhorn held up a hand. "Please, my friend. I did nothing, and any help I might have provided has been rewarded in my joy at the completion of your superb work. There is no need for any payment."

"*Mas*-ter!" Hopnard whined.

"Besides," Fayhorn went on, "you have a long journey ahead of you, and will surely need the small amount that you have left after your long journey heeeee—"

The word was cut off by the gleam of gold from Sum Lin's saddlebag. It was packed with the precious metal, containing the equivalent of a small keg. "I believe that I have enough for the journey," Sum Lin said, smiling. "The other saddlebag is similarly equipped."

"But I . . . I thought you were a penniless scholar!" stammered Fayhorn.

"My family is old and great, but I have found in many lands that no one bothers a man who appears poor. Come." The scholar heaved one of the saddlebags off his steed and dropped it on the ground. "You have helped me finish my dream. Now let this gold help build your own."

The old man dug his heels into his horse's side, and rode off through the curtain of rain toward the east. Fayhorn looked for a long time at the bag of gold lying in the road.

"Fetch it, Hopnard," he said at last. "But before we tell our tale to those fools in the tavern, we shall stop at the house and heat our crucible. I doubt that even they would believe that griffins would haul gold coins all the way from the Orient. But *molten* gold — now that's a different story." He ran his fingers through the tendrils of his long beard. "Yes, that's a story they may just believe. I think, in this case, at any rate," he told the

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struggling Hopnard, laden under with the dual weight of the gold and his hangover, "that belief *can* be purchased."

Fayhorn was right. The people of the town, seeing the huge lump of molten gold, believed the story of the griffin, and believed in Fayhorn's magic again. Some of them even began to come to him once more for charms and poultices, and he took the commissions graciously, though he no longer needed to for his purse's sake.

But best of all, within a week he was turning iron to zinc, with the expectation of greater things ahead.

(from page 48)

kobolds who invisibly plague whatever humans don't make offerings to them. The hobs and Chirudaks alike have plans and uses for Yarkol, but nobody's plans work out just as they intended.

No one can ever accuse Easton of being a flamboyant writer. For the first fifty pages or so, you usually *can* put down his books, because he doesn't resort to any of the dazzling tricks we writers usually use to keep you hooked until you finally begin to care about our characters. Instead he starts quietly, introducing his characters and creating his world so subtly that you hardly notice he's doing it. But by the end of Easton's books, you feel like you've known the characters forever, and you care very much what happens to them.

Because of Easton's lack of flamboyance as a writer, he hasn't flashed through the fantasy community. But his novels have staying power. There are scenes that come back to my mind again and again; over the years I have forgotten many good stories, but Easton's *Masters of Glass* and *Iskir* remain fresh in mind. Quietly, modestly, he has become one of my favorite fantasy authors, and *Spirits of Cavern and Hearth* is his finest work to date.

At the end of the book, Yarkol's people know they have been saved, but have no idea Yarkol had anything to do with it. Only his companions understand what he has done. "Come with me," Etou tells him. "Come home to Greatwing tribe. We know how to honor our heros." That's the way it is for M. Coleman Easton, alas. His praises are not widely sung. But I'm part of the tribe that knows exactly what he has accomplished. You should be, too.

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Here is an exciting and innovative tale about a young crew member of a spaceship in grave trouble. Tom Thomas is a technical writer who lives in California; he has had two SF novels published, THE DOOMSDAY EFFECT and FIRST CITIZEN (Baen Books).

MESSAGE FOUND IN A DRAM BLOCK

By Thomas T. Thomas

216 LOST CHAINS] damage from what the captain chooses to call a "gravel cast." He's playing it very cool, of course, but it's clear to all of us that the lightsail vessel *Gossamer Princess* is in grave trouble.

Mr. Weston, the off-duty navigator, tells me that the "lateral vector" imparted by the collision puts us far off our original parabolic course of [256 BLANK BITS] around Jupiter. With our sails shredded, we cannot correct the trajectory.

Of course, we have square kilometers of anodized mylar in those capacious storage bins the crew keeps dipping into. That's for patching, Weston says. We do not have enough material — nor fittings, guys, or hands among the crew — to rig a full suit of new sails and make our rendezvous with Jupiter. I suppose I can appreciate that argument — though it sounds like bad planning.

Once set in motion and brought up to cruising speed by reaction tugs,

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these sunjammers fly the Mobius Loop between the Sun and the outer Gas Giants without ever firing a rocket. It's all inertia and geometry, with only the solar wind in their silvered sails to adjust course. In the hands of a clever navigator and a competent sailing master, a sunjammer like the *Princess* will fly the Loop forever.

Except now. Because of a few cubic kilometers of pea gravel, we shall curve through the remainder of the Asteroid Belt and pass Jupiter at a distance of some [16 BLANK BITS] million kilometers, far outside our intended curve. Which means we will miss our diving turn through Jupiter's gravity well and fail to make our heading for Saturn. Our next stop on *this* route is the inner thigh of the Milky Way, somewhere in Sagittarius.

At least we are still in the field of the Supra Crisium Antenna, for a while. And for as long as the comm system holds together, because Weston says our dish is "pretty badly holed."

Mother told me taking the Grand Transmartian Tour would be an adventure. I, of course, wanted to sample the raw frontier life of Ganymede, Titan, and the settlements of Triton. If we must now add a runaway lightsailer to the excitements — well, Mother's lawyers will certainly let Milkweed-Mariner Lines know of her displeasure.

. . . Captain Bolling is to make an announcement at dinner! We still eat in the Centrifugal Lounge. Although its great ballroom prisms are cracked and leaking slowly under the crew's bubble patches, the Lounge is still spinning at a third gee. The soup course is always a disaster in null gee, and squeeze bottles leave a taste, I always say.

October [16 BLANK BITS] — oh, what's in an Earth date, anyway? Flying out here, out of control. Bolling's announcement was terrible news. The Space Corps has no reaction vessels that can close orbits with us. Or, if they do, none that would have sufficient fuel to return to the Inner System of any inhabited place among the Giants.

Our only alternative is to take the escape pods, decelerate as much as we can, and wait for pickup. And the Corps suggests we do this sooner rather than later. Hear! Hear!

The "tragedy," according to Captain Bolling, is that the gravel also damaged two of our life pods. We do not have enough room for all passengers *and* the full crew's complement. (Negligent inattention to redundancy! Another point for our lawyers — if and when.) Bolling says "of

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course" it will be women and children first. However, I notice that the crew includes a surprising proportion of the fair lovelies. We also have — as cadets, messengers, room readies, and alternative bed partners — a perfect *horde* of boys who seem barely old enough to sign working papers. I suppose Bolling will count these among the first to use the pods?

Not while I draw breath. I am still two weeks short of my eighteenth birthday, so I am by law and custom a minor. I am also a paying passenger. A place in one of those pods is mine!

I was just about to voice these sentiments to the captain, when the sailing master, Mr. David, took me aside in the spinway outside my suite. In that impertinent, direct way of his, he asked if I would help keep the young ones under control and out of the way in the crisis. I started to point out that Milkweed-Mariners should certainly have staffed this two-year voyage with a child psychologist, or at least a social director. He cut in smoothly, apologized for the inconvenience, and assured me it was quite necessary. Then he hurried off.

The engineering section was busy for the next hour — swinging the life pods out of their niches in the hull; loading them with fuel and oxygen, or whatever the breathable mix was; checking battery and food reserves; synchronizing the gyros; and erecting the solar-power paddles. They did all this work without their customary concern for weight distribution and the trim of the ship. *LSV Gossamer Princess* is truly derelict.

I was observing their efforts from a skin bubble, when the purser swam through, bringing along half a dozen boys, children of passengers and most of the cadets. "Keep them here. Teach them a game or something," he ordered as he disappeared toward the pod hatch.

I tried to smile at them.

"Uhmm. What games do you know?" I asked the eldest, one of the ship's boys. He was perhaps twelve years old.

"What's going to happen to us?" he asked back.

"I suppose they're going to let you ride in that little spaceship out there." I pointed through the bubble.

"The medical officer gave us all a shot," he said. "Why did he do that?"

Probably because it was going to be damned crowded inside the pod. And drowsy boys, sleeping boys, can be folded into smaller spaces and will use up less oxygen than thrashing, chasing, fighting boys. Anything to extend the time they could float free and wait for pickup.

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"I know a game," I said, a little desperately. "A good game.... It's called, unh, 'Matches.'"

"Matches," a younger one repeated skeptically.

"Yes, I give you a sequence of things — numbers or objects or colors or anything — and you have to repeat them back to me, exactly in order. If you can't, then you lose a turn."

"That's a dumb game."

"I know, but it will be fun. Let's try. Umm — red, blue, red, red, green, blue, brown." I turned to the littlest one.

He blinked at me sleepily.

"You have to say it back," I prompted.

"What?"

"The colors," whispered the eldest.

"What colors?"

"The ones he said."

"That's dumb."

It was like watching flowers close up in the evening. The trank took hold fast. We didn't get through one round of my game — which I still think was pretty clever for a first-time try — before their bodies relaxed completely and floated with the air currents in the passageway. Suddenly I was no longer the game master but a herder, keeping the little group together and out of the way of the engineers bustling back and forth.

Twenty minutes later the purser came back and began collecting limp bodies. He winked at me. Then he steered them two at a time toward the pod's hatch, where a woman from the patching crew gathered them in. I helped, bringing along the next two.

Suddenly it was empty in the corridor....

Mr. David has fired off the pods. One. Two. Three. The comm station has given the Space Corps's following reaction ships a time tick for each pod, along with vector and deceleration sequence. The radio tech is "almost sure" it all got through.

That leaves thirty-six of us aboard: Captain Bolling; his officers and senior crew, including three women who elected to stay with the ship; a dozen older male passengers; and me. We are assembled on the forward flight deck.

"What's going to happen to us?" I asked Mr. David.

The captain looked around at me. Evidently it was a question that

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stalwart, stiff-jawed sailors didn't ask.

"Well, we're on a known heading," Bolling began, "and soon enough. . . ."

"Captain," Mr. David interposed quietly, "we still have the freight lighter. If we could spot a close rock, the sled would have enough delta vee to decelerate and match orbits. Probably."

"That's an unpressurized platform, Malachi. We'd be on suit reserves and bottled air. We could last no more than a week or so."

"We have plenty of bottled air, sir. And we can set up a blister tent. That would hold for up to three months. Anyway, it did for us in the war."

Somewhere behind me, one crewman whispered to another: "The Tiddlywinks War."

Dear God, he was *that* Malachi David!

"A fair plan," the captain admitted with a frown. "Except that out here you'll have a job of work finding a 'close rock.' We're into the 5:3 Gap. Nothing ahead of us but the Hildas Group, Thule — which is [24 BLANK BITS] in the other direction — and then the Trojans."

"We may still find something," Malachi David said reasonably. "Can't hurt to look."

October [16 BLANK BITS] — The crew keeps watches, I suppose, to nurse the connection with Supra Crisium, posts lookouts for rocks and shoals, and does whatever else the skeleton crew — and *that's* a phrase with new meaning, suddenly — of a derelict sunjammer does. I do know, however, that room service is no longer functional, and we remaining passengers have been invited, politely but firmly, to join the ship's company for meals in the wardroom.

. . . After drifting days of utter boredom, Mr. Weston of Navigation has presented us with exciting news. His telescopes have spotted and cataloged a largish collection of asteroids ahead of us. A new find, he says. Their "deviation" from our present, hapless course is a distance that our freight lighter can deal with. Just.

Under magnification, the asteroids show up as a group of small, mostly dark bodies with one rock that is very nearly white. Oh joy. Home at last.

The rest of the company cheered, and the captain's knotted face was wreathed in smiles. Evidently the prospect of living for three or four months in a cold, stiff, scratchy, smelly space suit doesn't daunt his old bones one bit. I would far prefer to stay in the comfort and

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warmth of the ship, but no one is asking me.

The comm station immediately relayed to Supra Crisium both the sighting and our intention of abandoning ship. After accounting for the lightspeed lag, there is still no acknowledgment. The techies insist their systems are powered up, and our outward course is still in Crisium's field. So the trouble must be in the antenna head, sending or receiving. They give us fifty-fifty on the message getting through.

The freight lighter is even less than I imagined. Picture a child's snow sled. Not the kind with a frictionless field, but a real antique with steel runners on a slatted platform. Add tanks for reaction mass and oxidizer, a chemical engine, and matrices of tiny D-rings for strapping down cargo or, in this case, people. Primitive.

The suits we will wear are not as barren — nor as threadbare — as the rentals we had for the walk on the Moon. Still, they lack the chafing gear, nutrient flavor selections, and entertainment resources of some of the models I've priced in the Wemford catalog. It will be a very long week.

We are allowed to take nothing except our naked bodies and the ship's-issue space suits. Less mass to decelerate, Mr. David explains. However, I will not be deprived of my Pocket Secretary, come whatever. What they don't know won't hurt anybody. The only place I can think to hide the PS is down one leg of my suit, though. So it may be some time before I can continue this journal.

We're going to assemble and strap down in a few minutes. The ship's comm station will be set to max gain and broadcast. It will act as both a beacon and a repeater for our link from the sled. (If the antenna head is working at all.) Mr. Weston has fed in our time tick and the location of our asteroid group at [256 BLANK BITS] on a continuous loop. Someone had better find us. Soon. . . .

NOVEMBER [16 BLANK BITS] — Pelly Bay is the most remarkable sight I've seen so far on this trip. If it is indeed a human artifact, it's doubly wonderful. Ingenious. Simple. Crude beyond belief.

It's a large white stone, at least from a distance. Pelly Bay tumbles along its orbit with a dozen or more dark companions. They look like a pod of humpback whales breaching into the cold Arctic sunlight around an iceberg. Mr. Weston's trig calculations say the main asteroid is two

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hundred kilometers long by 120 or so in diameter.

Landing our sled on the white stone's surface would have been a disaster. Before we had an irreversible approach vector, however, Malachi David discovered the radio beacon, faint but unmistakable. A few minutes later, Weston spotted the visual beacon, strobing intermittently on one of the asteroid's wide-swinging poles. We altered course for this point.

Up close, Pelly Bay's surface looked less like white chalk or bone and more like quartz or glass. It also showed more clearly that hint of color that, farther out in the dim sunlight, some of us could see and others not. The color was green, like living plants.

The visual beacon was at the end of a stalk antenna attached to . . . a spider. It didn't look *exactly* like that. But Mr. David used the term, and, once you know what the machine does, the name sticks.

The Spider's midsection seems to be sealed to the white surface of the asteroid, while its top is a docking ring for something pretty big. Around the ring are six cranes or booms or grapples that look a lot like legs —except there should be eight of them, right?

The head is some kind of control room, studded with antennas and bezel ports. Opposite the head is a huge abdominal section, trailing strings of murky glass that attach it to the asteroid's surface. Like a spider webbed tightly to the cocoon of its last — and very largest — fly.

Mr. David decelerated the sled on the dregs of its chemical propellants. He matched the falling away of the asteroid's blunt pole and dropped us neatly inside the docking ring on the Spider's midsection.

"Tie down with some of those cargo straps," he ordered. "We'll see if we can find some way to cycle this lock without mating a forty-foot pressure door."

"What about a side hatch?" one of the engineering staff, Cleve Willis, asked.

"Better yet," the sailing master responded.

"What is this thing?" Captain Bolling asked.

"An air lock," Malachi David answered simply. Then he switched off the suits' all-call channel, 33. Damn! He probably just wanted to keep the intersuit chatter down, but it took me awhile to tongue-click through and pick up their conversation again.

". . . whole thing," the captain was saying when I found them again. He sounded petulant. "This ship, or whatever it is. And the white stuff

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it's sunk in, which isn't like any asteroid I've ever heard of."

"Oh. It's a mining colony. And unless I miss my guess, it's a famous one."

"You mean there are people here?"

"Were. Not anymore."

"Mr. David!" one of the passengers called on 33.

"Yes, Mr. Broughton?" David replied.

"We found the hatch — or manway. It's not locked."

"Of course. Not polite to lock it. . . . We're coming."

The inside of the Spider, when we got assembled in the receiving bay and cracked our helmet seals, smelled of dead air, decay, and something else I hadn't seen or smelled in fifteen months — dirt. Brown earth was caked on the floor in the shape of muddy bootprints.

In space you get used to clean surfaces. They may be pitted. They may be scarred with tool marks and impacts from free-floating furniture. They may be stained with foods and solvents and lubricants. They may even be feathered, very lightly, with rock dust or household lint held by electrostatic attraction. But you *never* see muddy bootprints. They shock your mind right back to rainy days, water in puddles, dripping windows, runny noses, yellow slickers, galoshes, and quietly humming repulse wands.

I bent over to stare at the nearest of the prints. It had a fragment of long, bladelike leaf mashed into it. Of course it wasn't fresh and green, but brown and curled. Still, it had once been alive and wet, out here beyond the orbit of Mars.

"What is this place, again, slowly . . . ?" the captain asked Mr. David.

"Pelly Bay."

I could see flashes of recognition at odd places in our little crowd. The name meant nothing to me.

"Perhaps you'd better explain," the captain said, "before we intrude further."

Here, as near I can remember, is what Mr. David told us, while we stood among muddy traces in the fractional gravity of the receiving bay.

Pelly Bay was the last of the great paid migrations of the preceding century. It was an artificial environment — but made on the cheap, which was typical of a Lunar and Liberation Colonies project for Earth immigrants who could pay only the lowest fares.

First, the L&L engineers chose a medium-size rock with a pull of at

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least 0.01 gee. They wanted a spinner — not a tumbler — doing about one revolution every twenty standard hours. Not so fast that angular momentum would sling everything off into orbit, not so slow that one side baked in the sunlight while the other froze.

Second, bombard it with dirty snowballs — tons of sewage sludge from the five Liberation Colonies. This step was, from L&L's point of view, the most costly and wasteful. The sludge was 96 percent free water, the most precious substance in the Outer System. Bombs of metallized paint would keep it frozen on the Sun side until the wrapper could be put on.

Third, seal the surface. Their machine for this was the Spider, whose abdomen was equipped to crack a silicate asteroid and spin it into miles of free-flowing glass filament coated with a semiliquid sealant. Flying a low orbit over the surface of Pelly Bay, the Spider lay strips and cross-strips of this material, like wrapping up a drugged fly.

The captured solar radiation heated and melted the sludge, and soon gas pressure from the liquids in it expanded and tightened the fabric. Beneath this misty sky, there were hundreds of cubic kilometers of space, enough for men to walk upright, for winds of a sluggish sort to blow, and for the greenhouse effect to continue drawing heat from the far-off Sun.

Fourth, provide atmosphere for those sluggish winds to move. In its last sticky orbit, the Spider settled near one pole of the asteroid, webbed in its own glasswork, becoming both project command center and air lock. Into the rising fume of sludge fog and sewer gases, the L&L engineers pumped fresh-cracked nitrogen and oxygen. They would wait only five weeks for the mixture to settle out before sending in the first colonist/miners.

Fifth, shield the new planetoid from the solar wind. L&L put a pair of huge electromagnets, powered by high-gain focused photocells, in matching synchronous orbits. On a small scale, these gave Pelly Bay its own Van Allen Belt.

"What happened to the people?" Broughton asked.

Malachi David shrugged. "Nobody knows. Seven years after it was created, Pelly Bay disappeared. Its radio stopped sending, and when the L&L astronomers looked for it, it was gone."

"You said the engineers wanted a spinning asteroid, not a tumble," I spoke up. "In case you haven't noticed, this one's tumbling."

"I know . . . ," David said. "And it's not where the Belt charts say it should be, not by [24 BLANK BITS]."

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"Where are the electromagnets?" Captain Bolling asked. "Big things like them should have been obvious as we came in."

"Some kind of perturbation," the sailing master replied. "An uncharted rock, a passing comet, something upset the group and scattered it pretty badly."

"So the colonists died." From the captain.

"Yes. Variation in the orbit would change the colony's internal temperature. Or perhaps an undeflected solar flare mutated some virus or bacterium that spread too fast. A dozen or more parameters could have tipped over and crushed the delicate energy balance we call life."

"A meteor hole in the fiberglass surface?" I suggested.

"Oddly enough," Mr. David said thoughtfully, "that doesn't seem to be the culprit. The fabric is self-patching. Of course, you can always find a big enough rock, but the bag would be deflated, wrapped in loops and wrinkles across the surface. This looks gastight." He checked the readouts on the far pee-door. "Pressure's within a few pounds of sea-level Earth."

"What about these muddy tracks?" I asked.

"Well. . . . The people from inside would probably come up here from time to time."

"But they lead *out*," I persisted. "Out through the personnel hatch we came in. Why would they go outside?"

"I don't know," Mr. David said. But his eyes focused on me with a curious light in them.

We were crowded into the receiving bay, standing asses to elbows. The captain roused himself. "We should move where there's more space. Which way do we go?"

"Command center this way, glass factory back there. Not going to be much standing room in either. But you might find a working comm set among the controls."

The captain ordered a tech forward. Then: "What about going down to the surface?"

"Good bet — unless we find whatever it was that drove the original colonists out."

"Cap'n!" It was the comm tech. "Somebody made a real mess in here. This control room was closed down with extreme prejudice — maybe with a sledgehammer, too."

The captain sighed. Mr. David didn't seem surprised.

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They sent a recon team into the Spider's abdomen, the "glass factory." It was undamaged, but it took a trained technical eye to tell the difference. Insulated pipes, power buses, control circuits, and catwalks crossed and recrossed. The human-sized room in there was mostly crawl spaces.

"Which way down?" the captain asked.

Mr. David indicated the pressure door we were standing on. "We'll try to dilate this door — if we can," he instructed. "Those of you who can't crowd into the command center and glassworks, find handholds on the sidewall here."

"Should we put our helmets back on?" I prompted, after a beat.

"Good idea, Mr. Gregson!"

We all clamped down and retuned our suit radios, began moving off the pee-door.

Malachi David and Captain Bolling found the door controls easily enough. As the metal leaves separated, a phantom wind laden with moisture geysered up into our cool, dry space. It fogged our helmet visors. Below our feet was a cavern of green light.

Hanging on a ledge near the switch box, Mr. David cracked his seals and took a shallow breath.

"Stale aquarium," he informed us over Channel 33. A deeper breath. "Also well-used spatball shoes, failed septic filters, ten tons of Cookie's freezer meat gone over, and — aghh! — your horse has been eating fish!" He clamped down the visor.

"Breathable?" I asked dryly.

Mr. David's eyes flicked over toward me. His teeth showed.

"Just barely."

Three meters below the door was a landing stage. The metal grillwork reflected the light wetly. It had a furred look, too, like it was covered with mud or moss.

"Allen," the captain ordered one of the ship handlers, "step down there and see what we have."

AB Carl Allen made the mistake of jumping down onto the landing stage, instead of climbing down. He must have felt like he weighed, in that fractional gravity, just two to three kilograms, complete with suit and air bottles. But he hit that grating with his full mass of 120 kilograms at a terminal velocity of four or five feet per second. He broke through like the stage was made of rotten straw.

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It might as well have been. The steel bars were rusted to a swollen crust with just wires of hard metal at their core. Those wires tore his suit and lacerated his flesh. Allen screamed as he fell through into the green gloom. We could hear his wails and curses clearly on Channel 33 for a minute and thirty-four seconds. They ended in a wet-sounding impact.

"Close the damn door!" the captain barked.

Mr. David worked the controls, and the panels irised shut.

"Now what?" one of the sailors asked.

"May I suggest, Captain," the sailing master said quietly, "that we stretch out wherever we can here and try to get some rest. It was a long crossing, and we — some of us — are making mistakes."

The captain nodded and ordered a watch detail. He set the purser to assigning spaces on the pee-door and in other areas, and to arbitrate foot-in-face disputes. We settled down for six hours of groggy thrashing. Mr. David, on the first watch, is monitoring the air system — using whatever dials may be working — with a worried frown.

I believe our time in the Spider won't be very—

"What's all the whispering about, Mr. Gregson? And what do you have there?"

"My Personal Secretary, Mr. David."

"You smuggled that aboard the freight lighter, did you? Good idea. We need somebody to keep records and make things official. You're appointed."

"Why, thank—"

"Get some sleep now. You'll need it."

November [16 BLANKS BITS] — I woke up staring into a pair of green eyes. They were so close that the nose belonging to them was touching alongside mine. It switched sides as those eyes peered into first one of mine, then the other. Then they drew back, and I could see that the face belonging to them was smooth, young, and female. It was framed by a bird's nest of pale blonde hair.

A beautiful face, with just one blemish: High on her left cheek, outlining the cheekbone, was an ash-colored birthmark. Or perhaps, because of its pitting and striations, it was a scar.

When she sensed my eyes focusing on the scar, her head pulled back and her mouth pulled down at the corners. She slapped me — lightly, like a kitten.

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"Quit playing, Nazhda, and finish binding him." The voice was male, mature, and hard. The language was something Slavic, but the PS clipped to my suit's neck ring rendered it into English.

"I just wanted to see him wake up."

"So you have. Now put him with the others."

My legs had been tied together with a bandage or winding that appeared to be a swatch of fiberglass. How deeply asleep I must have been, not to feel her doing that! She now took my hands, crossed them at the wrists, and wrapped the fabric over and under. I tried to struggle, and she cuffed me with her elbow without dropping the rhythm of her winding.

Then she lifted me to her shoulder and carried me to a pile of wriggling, bound-and-gagged shapes, the rest of our party. I seemed to be the only one among us with his mouth free. The pile was centered on the pee-door.

"What are you going to do with them, Vlad?" asked another, more bantering, voice. "Drop them to make fertilizer for the Great Smelly? Or release them to the thin side to —" The PS said *cleanse*, but the word could have been *sterilize*. "— them?"

"I'm going to see what useful equipment they have, first. That sled was a good design, wasn't it?"

"If you have an unlimited supply of fuel for it, yes. Bad planning if you don't. But go ahead and search. . . . They look soft enough."

A dozen pairs of hands were doing a swift police pat-down among us. The girl's were just finishing with me as the PS whispered this conversation into my ear. The scritching noise caught her attention.

"Mine has a box that talks!" She unclipped my Personal Secretary, then fumbled and dropped it as her voice came out — a squeaky mimicry — in translation.

The others gathered around then. They had lean, bearded faces, and many — no, most of them — bore that same ash-colored mark. Sometimes it shadowed a jawline, sometimes the forehead or cheek. Was it some kind of genetic trait?

They wore space suits that looked rumpled and patched. The metal fittings on them seemed to have been designed for some other purpose and then made over with pliers and a file. The fabric of the suits was that same gray-white-iridescent fiberglass, and unlined. It must have itched like the fleas of Hell. The helmets weren't helmets at all, but pressure

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"If you have no breathable or eatables, then you will burden us," Vlad said soberly.

hoods fitted with leaves of solid glass. They had apparently been custom-molded for each wearer's head.

"He's young to be a techmaster, Vlad," the bantering one said, pointing at me.

"Maybe he's talk leader. Maybe they don't care much about talk."

"Who are you? And why have you attacked us?" I said this loudly, for the PS's sake.

It's a smart little machine: given a sample of non-English, it can usually crack the grammar, if the language is in its banks. Given deep immersion in a new context, as now, the PS will usually flip over and do English-to.

"No one calls it an attack," their leader, Vlad, replied. He didn't seem to mind talking to a box. "We find trespassers sleeping in the —" Green Gate? That's what the PS called it. "— and we want to make sure they intend us no harm."

Very smooth. A diplomat.

"Does it harm people to 'sterilize' them?" I asked indignantly.

"Izak is hasty. He speaks before his mind works. He is our fly leader, not our talk leader."

"And what kind of leader are you?" I asked.

"I am the feeder of mouths."

"Look. We need help. Our ship, the *Gossamer Princess*, was wrecked not far from here, and we had to abandon her. We came here because we had no other refuge. Our air bottles are almost empty. The food in our suit reserves is low. There's really nothing we can —"

"Yes, he's the talk leader, all right," Izak grinned.

"If you have no breathable or eatables, then you will burden us," Vlad said soberly. And he was their "feeder of mouths." Oops!

"Well now, we can certainly pay for your help. Pay well. When the Corps arrives to pick us up —"

"What is 'exchange-rate/hostel-fees/bar-tab'?" Vlad asked. The Personal Secretary must have slipped a digit.

"Payment. A letter of credit. Money. Or, if you wish, we can provide you with goods in kind, in return for your hospitality."

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"*Dyengki.*" He sounded the Slavic word carefully, and the PS gave it back to me: *money*. "I do not know this concept." Stiffly.

"Well, we'll certainly be glad to teach you."

"Teach.... Ah, you propose to give us knowledge. That we can always use. You may come with us."

So the strangers released us and gave us back our helmets. Outside the body of the Spider, they had two vehicles: long, open frameworks with black wings and saddles for three to five people, handholds for many more. They called them "shoot-scooters."

"Some kind of mass driver," Mr. David said on Channel 33. "The black panels absorb solar energy; those stators in the framework drive a chunk of ferrous meteorite — or a rock wrapped in steel bands — backward for its reaction effect. Simple, neat, easily repaired. But where do they get the rocks?

"By the way, Mr. Gregson...." He switched over to an isolated channel. "You did very well in there. Better than the fellow who dozed off on watch!"

"Who was that?"

"Not sure yet, but I think it was [1,024 BLANK BITS], although that's just circumstantial evidence."

The scooters had no extra seats for our party. The native "fly leader," Izak, quickly worked out the strongest joints of our sled and attached towlines. While he did this, Vlad passed among us, took readings off our air bottles, and then signaled exchanges that equalized pressure with his own party. The native air, mixed with our remaining breathable from the *Princess*, tasted stale and a little fishy. I had the impression of gases that had passed through many lungs and been filtered and oxygenated with homemade equipment.

The first jump took us across to the nearest dark asteroid, a gap of about four hundred kilometers....

November [16 BLANK BITS] — That crossing took five hours and answered Mr. David's question.

About halfway across, the scooters did run out of iron chunks from their net bags — probably because Izak hadn't thought to account for the extra weight of the sled and ourselves. Without a lot of fuss and arm waving, the natives began dismantling the machines' metal frameworks

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and feeding pieces of them into the stators.

From our vantage point, a hundred meters away, Mr. Weston claims he could see them cutting the iron with knives. He says a faint purplish light came out of the handle. Some kind of laser?

Anyway, we crouched on our freight platform and watched them shoot pieces of their vehicles over our heads. It didn't seem a very economical way to travel.

The nearby asteroid was a mottle gray ball, tumbling worse than Pelly Bay, with a slight roll put on for flavor. Izak must have been juggling numbers in his head to maneuver his two reaction vehicles and our dead mass around it. He swung us in a tight loop and dropped the sled on a point that would let the asteroid's proper motion snag the scooters on their towlines and settle them upon a clear patch of rock. Not bad flying.

Half a kilometer away across the surface was a stone beehive or, more properly, a rock igloo chinked and sealed with molten glass.

On the other side of it was a solar collector, crudely built but huge in scale. I began to understand how they melted and shaped their iron and glass.

Nearer and all around the igloo were greenhouses: glass blisters set into the rock substrate of the asteroid. Their inside surfaces, I could see, were clouded with moisture and showed the green glow of growing things. That would be their source of food and oxygen cycling. It was a wonder that anyone would let Izak do his fancy flying so close to the old plantation!

The igloo's entrance tunnel was a hand-cycled lock. Beyond it was a circular space about sixty meters in diameter and twenty high. There must have been two hundred people in there, living on brackets and shelves, butt to backside.

Half of them were women and girls. They were each working quietly at some hand task: scribing silicon wafers, patching suit material with the flat side of a laser knife, tending pots of food — or perhaps chemicals — and charging batteries. The youngest children were making a game of hand-cranking a filter pump. It seemed to be exchanging the atmosphere with a nearby greenhouse.

They were all long-limbed, most over two and a half meters tall, pale as bats, and thin as leather-covered skeletons. The benefits of low-gravity living — plus a diet of simple vegetable fibers. And about two-thirds of

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the faces I could see had that ash-colored shadow.

Everyone in our party is generally amazed. Here are humans living on bare rock, trading gases with green plants. They are crowded beyond endurance into a foul cave with light from a few flickering gray tubes and some murky glass panels in the stone wall. They scratch away at the scattered fragments of human technology. We have seen lasers and solar cells but neither radio nor cybernetics.

And yet, in that first view from the air-lock port, we could see they are happy. Some of the women sang as they worked. Their children tumbled each other about and made pixie faces at us newcomers. They are so cruelly deprived, yet they were prepared to take thirty-five new mouths into their packed home and make us welcome.

Well, a strange kind of welcome. The people inside the igloo crowded around us, examining our strange space suits and personal effects. One woman took my suit gloves, felt the soft material.

"*Gladky!*" she said, nodding and smiling. My little PS gave this as *smooth*. Then she traded me on the spot, without asking, for a pair of fiberglass gauntlets whose wrist rings certainly did not fit my suit's.

When I pulled her back and pointed this out, she seemed not to understand. I finally ended up tapping the ring, mouthing a great frown, and repeating, "No match" in simple English, which came out *nye podobniy*.

"Ah," she said, with more nods and smiles. "Make fix!"

In thirty seconds, with shears and a vise clamp, she adjusted the rings on my suit so that the new gloves — which were raw glass, heavier and less flexible than my old ones, scratchy across the knuckles, and utterly horrid — fit perfectly.

Other little hands were going through our pouches and over our equipment. My little exchange with the glove thief had attracted one of the tall teenagers to my Personal Secretary. He tried to unclip it from my neck ring, where I'd put it when I took off the suit helmet. I blocked his hand gently and shook my head in his face.

"*Nyet!*" I said with my own voice. The PS cordially echoed *No!*

The boy pouted, then made another grab. Which I blocked with a little more force.

In another two seconds we would have been rolling on the floor in a pig tussle. Except, the green-eyed girl from our party, Nazhda, stepped forward and pushed the boy away. She hissed and spat something in fast

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language. My PS caught only about half of it, but the gist was that my equipment and I were the women's property. Or perhaps hers. She didn't seem to make a distinction.

The boy backed off, grumbling. I was told later, and rather pointedly, that he was Izak's natural son.

We were fed a meal of coarse bread and a broadleaf soup with bits of some crustacean that might once have been shrimp. And then we were left alone — or as alone as you can be, sitting in people's laps — along a five-meter arc of the igloo's wall. Prime space, on the rock floor.

"What do you make of this, Mr. Gregson?" said Malachi David, at my elbow.

"These people have no right to be alive."

"What? Because they took your gloves?"

"No, I mean I just don't see how they manage. Or how they keep doing it for — how long? — 120 years?"

"You presume these are the original settlers of Pelly Bay?"

"Yes, of course, or at least their sixth-generation descendants."

"Not Rovers, then? Not just passing through?"

"Rovers don't exist, Mr. David. Even I know that. They're a legend, like the South Sea Pirates."

"Oh, they exist, all right." He was smiling. "And they account for a lot more mischief than the Corps lets be known. But your initial observation is correct. These people have been here a long time. Their technology is adapted in place and pared away to the essentials.

"Rovers, on the other hand, are mobile and equipped with a highly diverse technology — most of it stolen. The Rovers are gaudy pack rats. These people are Stone Age natives. Too bad. . . . They could live on this rock for a couple of hundred years more."

"What's too bad? And why shouldn't they go on for a thousand, a million years like this?"

"Not a big enough gene pool. And with scattered radiation, the odd solar flare, and the regular sunspot cycle, their collection of evil mutations is going to be a lot bigger than normal. The recessives will catch up with them, and all this will fall apart.

"There must have been thousands of people in the Pelly Bay colony," Mr. David continued, half to himself. "Now look around. Just a few hundred. And when you work out the child-to-adult ratio in this group, you

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can see they're not replacing themselves. These people are going sterile. Dying out."

"That's a shame," I said — and meant it. "But wait a minute, sir. . . . If they built this beehive for the thousands that came out of Pelly Bay more than a century ago, and now they're dying out, shouldn't it be *less* crowded in here? And this place is jammed to the rafters!"

"You're right, Mr. Gregson. . . . But I can't explain it."

"You know," said Weston, whose elbow had been digging into my left side so he couldn't help but be listening to Mr. David and me, "this patch of tumbling rocks shouldn't be here. But since they are, they might just form a bridge."

"How so?" Malachi David asked, across me.

"Well, we're on the inner edge of the 5:3 Gap." At my puzzled look, he explained: "That's a measure comparing orbits against Jupiter's. A rock in this neighborhood goes five times around the Sun in the same time Jupiter goes three."

"What does that do for us?" I asked.

"Nothing in particular," the navigator replied. "Except, the gravitational mechanics seem to create a gap here — and in other orbits that have exact ratios with Jupiter's. Places where asteroids don't settle into stable orbits. Pelly Bay and its companions must be here because they were dislodged by a perturbation; they're just passing through. So-oo . . . we could ride with them. Probably take us back to a denser part of the Belt, where we're more likely to run into an independent miner or a Corps beacon."

"That could take years," Mr. David said.

"You said something about a 'bridge'?" I prompted.

"We first discovered the largest rock in this tumble — Pelly Bay," Weston said. "The largest is also the most massive and would tend to lag in a perturbation, So you can bet it's on the trailing edge of this group. Somewhere ahead are the rest of these stones. If they're not too widely separated, and if our newfound friends agree to help, we could travel forward among them. Maybe five or six thousand kilometers."

"Which is less than the tip of my little finger in astronomical terms," the sailing master grunted. "And all that work puts us exactly *where*?"

"Within [16 BLANK BITS] seconds of arc of the LSV *Flying Photon*'s parabolic route. On her return run from Saturn. Two weeks from now. If we hurry."

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"Would our suit radios reach her?"

"I'm sure Jensen or anyone else from the comm shack could arrange to boost the gain. At least temporarily."

Mr. David took a long time to consider the proposal.

"We'd need a lot of air and food for that kind of traveling, rock to rock," he said at last. "Not to mention the wear and tear on those scooters. We'd be bending the hospitality of these people. Maybe beyond breaking."

Weston gave it two seconds' thought. "We probably could buy a couple of their scooters and—"

"With what?"

"Figure that later. We rig the mass drivers along the sled. Carry iron mass with us. Then we could rig come CO_2 filters to extend. . . ."

They were getting into technical details. Not wanting more conversation, and having nowhere to turn away, I let my head fall forward. They could talk across the back of my neck. I would catch up on this log, in whispers, and then rest. . . . So much to see and remember. . . .

NOVEMBER [16 BLANK BITS] — "We must have a plan of action," Mr. David was telling the captain.

I came up out of a dazed sleep and immediately felt pins and pains in my legs. Misery is trying to doze with your knees pulled up and your chin tucked against your breastbone. Wearing a Milkweed-Mariner emergency-issue space suit. Without chafing gear.

Right away I had to find the comfort facility — or the potty shed, pee-tube, vacuum valve, or whatever these people used. . . . It was worse, and more fragrant, than I thought. Can you really grow rice that way?

Back at our stretch of wall, Mr. David was using hand gestures and some broken Russian to communicate with Vlad. He reached for my PS the moment I showed up.

". . . need to travel down this rock chain. To meet our friends. Can you help us?"

"How far?"

Weston took the PS from Mr. David and said, "Six thousand kilometers."

Vlad wrinkled his nose, apparently not understanding.

"Klicks!" Weston said, hoping for a good translation.

"Ah, that is a long way. The others will have to help in that. I do not know all of them, but Izak does." He turned. "Izak! We need you."

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The "fly leader" came and squatted in our circle. He looked surly.

"*Shest miliyon metr*," Vlad told him, and pointed in a direction that they, presumably, held to be the leading edge of the tumble.

Izak grunted and put up his left hand with the fingers splayed. Using his right thumb, he began counting off fingers, over and over. But I could see he wasn't touching every finger: Count one, skip two, count one, skip one, count two — in a complex pattern that, of the whole tribe, apparently only Izak knew.

"Nine days," he said at last. "Two treaties. One battle. We take the long way around *Shatkiy Sobaka*."

Which my PS translated as Crazy Dog. Or maybe Tipping Dog was closer to his meaning.

"Then other tribes like yours are living in this group?" Mr. David asked quickly.

"Yes," Vlad answered carefully, his eyebrows coming down. "But we know the way best. We are the fastest travelers. We will take you, and you will give us the *dyengki* of knowledge, as the boy promised. Yes?"

Now Mr. David wrinkled his nose. "Yes, of course." And he shot me a glance.

"All except the boy himself," Vlad said.

What was this?

"The women claim him for their own, and who can argue with women?"

"That's not a prob—," Captain Bolling began.

"We can't leave Mr. Gregson," the sailing master said quietly. "He's a member of our party, and a paying passenger."

"An exchange of blood. That is proper." Vlad seemed vastly pleased with this outrage. "We will test him to make him one of us."

"We won't do it," Malachi David insisted.

"Then you all shall stay. The women will welcome you."

"Mr. David," the captain whispered, with a hand over the PS's audio pickup, "surely we could leave the boy a month or two. We can compute the location of this rock tumble from our last position. The Space Corps can retrieve him on their rounds."

"I don't like it," the sailing master whispered back. "Too much can happen. . . ."

"I don't like it, either!" I said aloud.

"We have no choice," the captain plowed on. "These savages have

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us completely at the mercy of their superstitions."

"No matter how it looks in the logbook?" Mr. David asked.

"The *Princess* is sailing out toward the Oort Cloud. What log are we keeping now?"

Mr. David looked at me, a weighing stare. "It would not be for long, son. The Corps will rescue you; I'll see to that personally."

"But I—"

"And if a traveling party doesn't set out to rendezvous with the *Photon*, none of us will ever get back. You see that, don't you?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You have my word that the Corps will not abandon you — or these hapless people," Mr. David promised. "After a century or more, the Pelly Bay survivors will finally be brought back to civilization."

"All right." Captain Bolling closed off our debate. "Tell *them*." He pointed at Vlad, Izak, the rest of the waiting savages, and removed his hand from the Personal Secretary.

Mr. David and Vlad talked through a long negotiation. I didn't listen. Just sat there thinking about being abandoned to these people and their barbarous ways.

From across the circle, the blonde girl Nazhda fished for my gaze and caught it. She gave me a big smile. Evidently word of what they were planning had already leaked out to the rows and shelves of people all over the beehive.

"That's awkward," Mr. David said, nudging my arm as the Pelly Bay leaders concluded negotiations and moved out of the circle.

"What is?"

"Weren't you—?" Oh well, they want to do some sort of initiation, to prove that you are a man and worthy of the tribe. Vlad says all the boys and most of the young women go through it. A rite of passage. All ceremonial, I suppose, with painted faces and dancing, loud music and a little liquor. It can't be too terrible if children do it. Although Vlad did use the words 'emergency training' . . . probably some misunderstood technological holdover, from their civilized days."

"What do I have to do?"

"Just hang on and follow my lead. Izak, who seems to be in charge of this, demands that at least one of us, one of the traveling party he will lead, go through it, too. Again 'emergency training.' So I volunteered."

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"Thank you, I guess. When does it start?"

"About an hour, near as I can judge from their time references. Something about when this rock and that rock align in something."

Shortly they led us out, the whole party from the *Princess* and most of the people from the shelter. We walked in bounding lopes over the rock surface. At the far end of the asteroid, among the shadows and the stars, we found another rock tumbling no more than a kilometer or so away, sharing a common center of gravity with ours. This one was a smaller body, much darker, with a more crystalline cast to its surface. It looked like that lump of hard coal I saw once in the Museum of Arts and Technology in London, on Earth. Very pretty.

It was spinning fast, like a giant gear turning above our heads. One pointed end rushed up, brushed within fifty meters of where we were standing, then fell away until we faced its flat side. After that, the other end came around, passing within a hundred meters.

Eight or nine of the Pelly Bay men each took two running steps and leaped across to the little one. They found hand- and footholds and clung to it like mountaineers. If they let go, the spin of the tiny asteroid would surely throw them off. After a second's pause, they scrambled to space themselves across the peaks and flat faces, so that one of them was always in our sight.

Each of the men had a fold of fiberglass cloth tucked into his suit belt. They looked like the native pressure hoods, but without the molded glass leaves for reinforcing.

On Channel 33, Mr. David explained:

"This rock is called the Little Brother. As Izak has explained to me, two of us — Mr. Gregson and I — must leap across to it just as these others have done. That's to prove our agility among the asteroids."

This was more than he seemed to know an hour ago. But it didn't sound too hard.

"The difference is that Gregson and I must jump without our suit helmets. That's to simulate an emergency situation — loss of suit integrity. It also tests our courage and our trust in those others, on that rock, to catch us and put a pressure hood over us."

No!

I don't remember screaming it aloud, or just screaming it inside my head. When you're wearing a suit helmet, thoughts sometimes become

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words and go out on Channel 33. Either way, most of our party turned and looked at me with worried eyes.

Mr. David was still speaking, so I must have kept the scream inside me. But I could tell from the quaver in his voice he was scared, too. Just a little.

"Almost all of their people have done this," he was saying. "And it's not a lot different from the pressure drills we had to do in the Corps. Izak promises his people are experienced at catching, and—"

And grinning while my eyeballs glazed and froze. While the blood ran out of my ears and nose. While the skin on my face sprouted a pink pressure rose.

Exposing naked skin to vacuum causes a kind of frostbite. You can stand it for a few seconds, but after you get freeze-dried down through the dermis, you're sure to lose some muscle and nerve tissue. And on my *face*, too! With no grafts available, and no surgeons standing by to apply them!

The worst is the breathing, of course. You can block your throat and nose for a while. But peep just once, and you'll — *I will!* — do the longest sustained whistle on human record. With no one to hear it, either.

I wouldn't go through with it! No matter how many of these native brats have sailed across and smiled as Daddy covered their little faces with cold, scratchy glass cloth. I had nothing to prove to these people. Let them reject me and take someone else, damn it!

But I wasn't going to jump first. Mr. David was.

Izak, all serious now, motioned him to a place on the very end of the big asteroid where human hands had carved a set of shallow steps. They were a stairway to nowhere, pointed at the center of Little Brother's mass.

Mr. David positioned himself on them and took a few practice steps up and down, tensing and stretching his legs. Then he nodded silently.

"Wish me luck," he said on Channel 33.

"—luck!" the others chorused. My mouth was too dry of spit and too stopped up with my tongue.

We could hear Mr. David take several deep breaths before he clicked his radio off.

Beside him, Izak and another native were watching Little Brother's swing carefully. As the taller peak came around, they reached for the sailing master's helmet, gave it a hard twist left, and yanked it off. His short hair puffed up around his head as the residual air in his suit escaped through the neck ring.

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Mr. David's eyes were tightly closed; I could see that immediately. His blind face was turned upward as Izak clapped him on the rump and sent him running up the stairs. His legs were still pistoning hard as he cleared the end of them and went into the gap. Their motion set him spinning, and he instinctively tried to break the spin with his arms.

Three seconds, four seconds . . . seven . . . ten . . . fifteen. . . .

He was still tumbling, his arms flailing, his head whipping around, trying without opening his eyes to sense the approaching peak of black rock. He crashed into it — or it came around and slapped him — on his neck and shoulders. He immediately spun about and rebounded off the dark surface on his face and chest.

Suddenly I knew how that strange, smoky mark had been made on Nazhda's and the others' faces. They had flopped against Little Brother like this and survived — and they weren't officers trained to the Corps, as Mr. David was. But they must have fallen closer to the men stationed around the turning asteroid. The sailing master failed to get a handhold in that second, rebounding impact and was thrown off.

Then he opened his eyes, too late. The dark surface was falling away beneath him. He opened his mouth in dismay. I could see his tongue trying to articulate a shout for help as a fog of vapor condensed in crystals about his head.

The men on Little Brother were scrambling toward him. They had weighted loops of thin cord to snare him with. In a minute or two, they had him pinned to the surface of Little Brother and a hood closed around his neck. But his limbs weren't moving. One of the natives waved what looked like an "all clear" back to us.

He than stayed with Mr. David while the rest moved again into position. They actually expected me to go through with this.

I was panting inside my helmet, a thin, panicked breathing that some voice inside me, perhaps a ghost of Mr. David's, said was doing me no good. I took a deep breath and tried to settle my lungs.

Izak and his companion drew me to the stairs. I could see, close up, that the other was a woman, perhaps Nazhda, behind the distortions of her glass hood.

I tried to exercise my legs, as Mr. David had done, but my kneecaps were doing their own dance, and my long muscles wouldn't cooperate.

Izak and Nazhda positioned me down on the steps, but I shook my

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head. No climbing run — by now I was too uncoordinated for that. Just one straight, hard leap, and get me across please God if you exist and hear me thank you.

They shrugged and took me to the top. Then they were looking at the spin of Little Brother and counting off the seconds, which I couldn't hear.

I would have called for luck from Captain Bolling and the rest of our party, but I had already turned off my radio.

Roughly, suddenly, long before I was ready, the two beside me laid hands on my helmet and yanked it off. I felt the *shoosh* of gas about my face, ending in a hard ringing in my ears. They popped, and I clamped down my throat. My eyes were shut, as Mr. David's had been.

The suit collapsed and stiffened about my legs, arms, and torso. But I could still feel Izak's slap across my buttocks.

I pumped down and, before leaping, blinked my eyes rapidly to get a fix on the swinging black mass above me. The tears froze in my eye sockets. Without knowing exactly what I was seeing, I shot my legs out.

The skin of my face and lips and far inside my nose was dry and cold and cracking. The sensation, or lack of it, went slowly down inside my suit, freezing my arms and stiffening my movements. When it reached my privates, they shriveled, and I almost clapped my hands down and sprang my legs up against my stomach to protect them. But that would have set me spinning, and some neuron in my reptilian brain, far older than the monkey instincts in my neocortex, kept me from balling up in my fall.

After some seconds I tried to blink again, to see how far off the mark I was and how long I would take to die, but my eyelids were frozen solid. Blind and stiff, with blood in my nose, I waited for the impact, the rebound, the shock of surprise as I screamed and exhaled and exhaled and —

One arm broke my fall, turned me, so that I struck the rock with my back. The air pack, with its shoulder padding, cushioned the impact. Somewhere in there I felt a *twang* as a fitting parted. Within two seconds the rough hood was against my burning face, and that warm, fish-tasting air was going up my nose and down my throat. I was alive. . . .

November [16 BLANK BITS] — I'm afraid I recorded all that in the euphoria of celebration last night. But I left out some important details.

Mr. David is comatose. When the Pelly Bay natives brought him back into the beehive, we could find a pulse and some pupillary reaction, but

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that's about it. The captain diagnosed brain damage due to anoxia.

Of course, they cannot take him over six thousand kilometers of rough, scrambling journey. It looked for a time there as if Izak would renege and not lead the party out to rendezvous with LSV *Flying Photon* unless somebody else endured their ritual. He was hungry for more victims. But Weston and Vlad overrode him, arguing that both Mr. David and I had shown our willingness. In the end, Izak agreed with them. Not graciously.

And of course, none of this changes my status one bit. I will still have to stay here as the women's "property." Even more so, as I am now accounted a "man" of this tribe.

The party will leave in a few minutes. Captain Bolling and Mr. Weston are anxious that they not miss the *Photon*'s passage. They have already charged me with keeping Mr. David fed and cared for. When the Corps picks up up, neurological assessment and microsurgery should be able to restore all — most — some — of his brain function. He may be different, but still human.

As they were explaining this, I glanced over at Vlad, who was following it all with the whisper translation from the PS. The "feeder of mouths" was not impressed. I could see him sizing up our sailing master for a place of honor in the rice paddies. Or maybe in the shrimp farm.

I promise to do what I can to keep him out of there.

I guess this is my last entry. The captain wants to take my Personal Secretary along on the trip out. He says it will enable them to continue the log of the *Gossamer Princess* in absentia. These journal entries will also give the Space Corps time and distance data with which to find this rock. I'll still be here. . . . Come and rescue me. Please!

[456 LOST CHAINS] We are in the last pressure dome, not two thousand kilometers from the projected path of the liner *Flying Photon.* Captain Raphael Bolling reporting.

Our guide, Izak, has made a most unreasonable request. He insists that we purge all references to the extraordinary crossings we have just made, and all directional clues from the personal entries Mr. William Gregson made upon this machine.

Of course, the savage didn't put it quite that way. When he observed us making log entries, he simply wanted to destroy the device. Something

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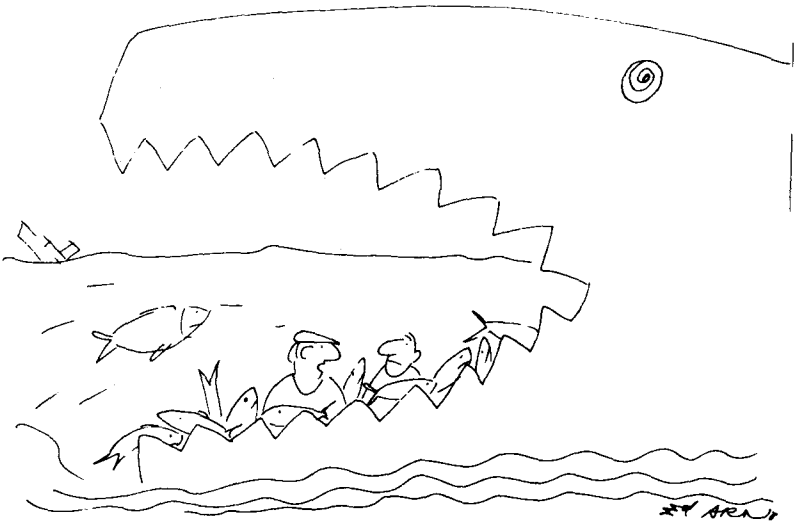
about "bad spirits," he says. Ah, he wishes to express it in person:

"Don't tell, no place, no backtrack. Ellandell men will come again, make us live in smelly-leaky hole. Die there. Stinks. Bad place to die. Don't tell about. . . ."

As you can hear, he's quite frantic. I'm sure that, if we don't comply, he will find some way to destroy Mr. Gregson's Secretary while we sleep.

It's a shame, really. This little memory bank has quite a tale to tell, of privations, heroic endeavors, the battle with hostile natives, the men we've lost — Allen, David, Cardham, James, Weston, Broughton — and the savage culture we've discovered.

Still, it's a small enough price to pay, I guess, for all of these people's help. And we can certainly re-create the story from our experiences. Not to mention reconstructing the location of the encampment where Mr. Gregson is still a guest. I myself took a first in astronavigation and have an excellent memory for numbers. We'll certainly be able to tell the Space Corps where to find the boy.



"I'm sort of disappointed; I thought a whale's mouth would be bigger than this."

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Bruce Holland Rogers teaches creative writing and literature through the University of Colorado's Continuing Education Division. He has previously published a short story in Quarterly West, *a poem in* Poetry Australia *and is currently working on a novel. His second story of* F&SF *is about poignancy . . . and plumbing.*

Whalesong

By Bruce Holland Rogers

"I DON'T KNOW WHY you expect me to get all weepy about it, Mother," Helen said into the phone. "It's not like David and I had an ideal marriage."

"Helen," said her mother, "that man's dead."

"And I'm sorry, just like I'd be sorry for any other stranger dying on the highway," Helen said. From the hallway bathroom came a high-pitched *Skyreeee! Skyreeee!*, and then a *Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk*. Helen covered the receiver. "Richard!" she called out. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing!"

"Well, cut out whatever's making the funny noise."

"It's not me, Mom."

Helen uncovered the receiver. "Sorry. Richard was making some noise in the bathroom."

Her mother's voice said, "How are the kids taking it?"

"Pretty well. They cry some, and then they're O.K. We're all handling it like troopers."

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"Helen, that's not natural."

"Oh come on, Mother. He wasn't around much for them, either. It's hard to miss someone you hardly see."

"Listen to me," said her mother. "You're being awfully stony about this. You sound a lot like your father, just too reasonable and hard to be believed. And that's what finally killed him, you know."

"A heart attack is what killed him."

"Helen, I'm telling you, no matter how far apart you and David were, he was your husband for twelve years. You lived under the same roof. . . ."

"Only in principle."

"What I'm saying," Helen's mother said, "is that it's not natural for you not to grieve even a little."

From the bathroom came *Skyreeee! Skyreeee!*, followed by a low, vibrating *Oooooooooomp.*

"Richard, cut it out!"

"I'm just washing my hands."

"Mother, I've got to go," Helen said, and hung up. Then, marching down the hall, she said, "Young man, when I'm on the phone, I expect a little—"

"It wasn't me!" Richard said as she entered the bathroom. "The pipes make noise when the water runs." He turned the faucet, and as the water ran, the bathroom filled with *Skyreeee! Skyreeee!*, and then *Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk.* "See?"

"O.K.," Helen said. "Not guilty. Where's your sister?"

"I don't know."

"Well, find her and get her to set the table, and you pour drinks. I want water."

"Can I have Coke?"

"No, you cannot have Coke. You and Carissa can drink milk like you always do with dinner, and I wish you would stop asking. Now, go get your sister."

Richard's shoulders slumped as though some of his bones had suddenly vanished, and he sighed, "O.K."

"Don't you drag your feet," Helen said. "Scoot."

When Richard filled his mother's glass at the kitchen sink, the pipes said *Aaaawoooooot*, and then echoed *Ootootoot.*

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"God, that's irritating," Helen said as she pulled the casserole from the oven.

"The toilet does it, too," said Carissa. "And the bathroom sink." She drummed on the table with two spoons.

"Do you want to go to your room?" Helen asked.

"No," Carissa said, still drumming.

"Then cool it and finish setting the table."

HELEN HAD always been amazed at how long the kids could dawdle over loading the dishwasher. Tonight, after trying unsuccessfully to read the newspaper in the living room while they fought and carried one item at a time from the table, she sent them to bed early and finished the job herself. When she turned the appliance on, it sang a rising and falling *Aaaank. Aaaaaaaank. Aaaaaaaaaaaank.*

"O.K.," she said. "That's enough!"

In the garage she opened David's toolbox, and as she touched the cool metal of the tools, she felt a tremor move from her hand and into her arm. She closed her eyes and said deliberately, "I will need a locking pliers and a pipe wrench and maybe a screwdriver," though she actually had little idea what she might need or what she might do with it.

Inside the house again, Carissa was calling her.

"What is it?" Helen said from the hall.

Long silence.

"What!"

"I want a drink of water."

"You're a big girl. You get a drink yourself, and then you get right back into bed. No dillydallying." She turned and walked toward the stairwell.

"Mom?"

"What now?"

Long silence.

"Carissa, what?"

Again silence, and Helen turned toward the basement stairs again.

As she started down, she felt strange, as though her limbs grew a little heavier with each step. The air felt thickened. Down. Down. Each step took longer than the one before it. Down. She became aware of the effort required to fill her lungs. There was a distant roaring sound, like the

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surf heard from afar. Each breath slow. Each step deliberate. From the bottom of the stairs, the light bulb at the top of the stairwell looked far away and shimmery. The basement air was damp. Helen put her forearm against the cold wall and took a long, slow breath. It was hard work.

Far away, she heard Carissa call, "Mom?" but she turned toward the utility room that lay beyond the rec room. Slow steps. Now, though, she no longer felt heavy. Instead, it was as though she were no heavier than the air, and she had to move slowly because she had to concentrate on keeping her feet on the floor with each step. She switched on the blue light over the pool table, and it seemed dimmer and bluer than she remembered it. Her hand felt the switch on the utility room wall, but no light came when she made it click hollowly several times. She swam into the room with the murky blue light behind her.

The room stretched out farther in front of her than reason told her it could. She couldn't see the walls. Two black immensities floated like zeppelins in the space in front of her, one a little larger than the other. Far away, as though through many walls of glass, she heard Carissa's feet on the floor above her. Whales, she saw in the dim light. They were whales. And when Carissa turned the faucet upstairs and the water began to flow in the pipes, the whales slowly turned their bodies toward the familiar sound, and the larger one cried, *Skyreeee! Aaaaaaaaank.*

The smaller one answered, *Aaaaaank. Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk.* Then the water in the pipes stopped.

Helen looked at the tools in her hands. The metal was warm. She thought of David's hands on them, and then of her own hands in David's hands. Large hands, she remembered. When had he last held her hands in his, sheltering them, nesting them? So very long ago. How far they had drifted. Distantly, she heard Carissa returning to bed. Helen turned and started slowly away. She switched off the blue light. Slow, difficult steps. At the bottom of the stairs, she felt for a moment that she would float away on a black current, back into the darkness. But then she mounted the first step and felt a little better with each subsequent progression toward the yellow light and the air.

She woke before dawn, and started the coffee brewing. In her bathroom she saw David's tools lying on the counter. She picked up the screwdriver, and it felt hard and cold in her hand. She made herself laugh a short, uncertain laugh. Whales.

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She stepped into the shower, and as the water began to fall, she heard *Skyreeee! Skyreeee!*, and an answering *Awoooooot. Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk*. This time she couldn't make herself laugh. Instead she heard a sound coming from inside her like air escaping, reluctantly, from a balloon. *Eeeeeeeeee*. Short breath. *Eeeeeeeee*. And then she managed a sob, and she began to add her own song to that of the whales. She sang for the seas, for the ancient seas that surrounded us once, that carried our voices across such distances that no matter how far we drifted, we were never alone.

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In this dark little tale by Garry Kilworth, John Straker finds the answer to the lines, "I shot an arrow in the air,/It fell to earth, I knew not where." And "where" is very strange indeed . . .

Bowmen in the Mist

By Garry Kilworth

JOHN STRAKER, Q.C., had bought the isolated cottage in Nottinghamshire for the express purpose of killing his wife. It was a neat graystone two-up-two-downer, with small front windows and a single door to the outside. There was an open fire in the tiny living room, and a view that looked out over a narrow vale flanked by trees — the remnants of Sherwood Forest.

Nearby, the Trent River wound lazily through meadowland, on its way to Gunthorpe, leaving an oxbow lake to fish in not two hundred yards away. At this point the river should have received little in the way of waste chemicals and be relatively unpolluted, but on the drive to the cottage, Straker had witnessed foam drifting down from a village where detergents were manufactured, and was determined to have a word with the local council about it.

He had not arrived lightly at the decision to murder Elizabeth, but now that the thought was in his mind, he planned its execution with his usual

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efficiency, and coldly calculated the odds of getting away with it, which seemed to him, good. It would be an accident, of course. Amongst his colleagues in the legal profession, he was known as a hunting, shooting, fishing man, and, as everyone knew, accidents on the field of sport were not uncommon. His forte was archery, and it was a simple case of mistaking Elizabeth, gazelle-like creature that she was, for a deer. Of course, he would have liked to have been able to divorce Elizabeth, but as an ambitious Queen's Counsel, a lawyer with a future, that was not possible. They did not allow divorcés to become judges, and he desperately wanted to become a judge.

Archery was Straker's first love, because of its historical significance. The bow had been with man almost from the beginning, and Straker's sense of tradition was strong. He liked the thought that he was helping to continue an association with a weapon that was essentially simple in concept, deadly, yet steeped in the mysticism of age and legend. When he held a bow, he had the past in his hands. Mesolithic Man had used the same missile launcher five thousand years previously, and it was this knowledge that made it seem an appropriate tool for ridding himself of Elizabeth. Straker was going back to ancient ways, when individual men were self-reliant and made their own laws, looking to no higher authority than themselves. The longbow had delivered England from defeat at Crécy, Poiters, and Agincourt, and now it would deliver Straker from a bad marriage and leave him free to marry Jane. Elizabeth would go the way of "Red Beard" Rufus, son of William the Conqueror, slain by an arrow while hunting deer in the New Forest.

It was a morning in June when he took over the cottage, and Straker decided to inspect the woodland in which he had hunting rights. It was on the estate of one of his friends, a member of the aristocracy, Lord Falkirk, with whom he had attended Eton. He dressed in his tweeds and deerstalker hat and set off.

The woods lay about a mile from the vale, over some pastureland. Straker carried with him his Bear Super-Magnum forty-eight-inch hunting bow and a quiver of three aluminium-shafted arrows. He thought he might take a hare or pheasant if it came his way, though Falkirk's deer were not to be touched for the present.

Once he reached its banks, Straker followed the course of the Trent until he came to a water meadow, which he crossed to the edge of the

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woods. There was no wall around this part of the estate: merely a double line of barbed wire attached to stakes. He carefully took the upper and lower strands of wire and pulled them apart in order to climb through. McDonald, the gamekeeper, had been informed that Straker might be seen around the estate, so there were no problems regarding Falkirk's forest workers.

He entered the woods and looked about him. He was obviously in an area that was visited infrequently, because of the large amount of undergrowth and lack of paths. That must have been a consequence of approaching the woodland obliquely, from a little-used angle. The place was choked with brambles and ferns. There was the ever-present smell of humus, which Straker inhaled with satisfaction, coming from the forest floor. The light was poor, but by no means inadequate for hunting. This looked like a good spot: the kind of area that the deer might retreat to when the hunting parties were out. He was glad to have discovered it.

Straker forced a way through the thicket with a stick until he came to a central glade, surrounded by large oaks and beeches, where the brambles had not had the opportunity to invade. Sure enough, there were spoor in plenty on the soft forest floor. The brambles had been kept at bay by trampling hooves. This was one of the hidey-holes of the quarry. Here the prey would gather while the hunters kept to more open areas.

The light came through the leafy treetops in mottled shafts and dappled the ground beneath. The silence around him had the soft quality of snow-covered countrysides, if silence can be said to have characteristics: a kind of holy quiet amid sepulchral glades and natural spires. Just the spot for killing Elizabeth.

Straker walked around the glade, studying the trees and shadowed areas with satisfaction. Yes, this was the perfect killing ground. Any accusing screams would be muffled by thick, surrounding foliage, and when they saw what tricks the light played, amongst the bushes, no one would blame him for mistaking his wife for a deer. He would say he had not expected that she would follow him into the woods. That she said she would wait in the fields beyond. Twilight. That was the best time. When the light was in its most deceitful mood. Straker would get her to wear her chamois-leather suit. Perfect.

He leaned against a tree and lit up a cigarette. It was while he was putting a match to the end that he caught sight of the figure in the glade,

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out of the corner of his eye. At first he thought it was the gamekeeper, or one of his men, but there was something about the light — a kind of shimmering effect, such as might accompany a mirage — that had him doubting. There was something very strange in the way that the sunlight penetrated the woods from two different directions, west and east, the two sets of oblique shafts crossing each other just before they touched the ground.

The figure seemed trapped between these crossed rays. It had a varying mistiness about it: an insubstantial quality that threatened reality. As far as Straker could make out, it was a man dressed in a ragged, homespun material, shapeless in design, with leather thongs crisscrossing the leggings up to the thighs. The hair on the head was long and unkempt, with a jagged, grizzled edge around the shoulders. The nose on the face was lumpy and set between two narrow eyes, while the mouth looked like a plowshare slice on a turnip.

One moment the figure would be solid, clear — the next, it would take on a translucent consistency through which the trees beyond were visible, in the way that gloaming shadows are, in woodland places. It seemed to be fading in and out of the world, governed by some irregular and indefinable pattern.

Far from being afraid, Straker was intrigued. What was this? A ghost? He had not previously believed in ghosts, but this was certainly an apparition of some kind.

"You," he cried. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The sound of his voice was muffled, as if he were shouting into a bank of snow. The man gave no indication of having heard. Then the figure turned slightly, and Straker noticed something fascinating. The man — if it was such — was holding a bow close to his side. The weapon was raised quickly, an arrow fitted, and then the figure took up the position of stable-stand, ready to loose the stele.

"What on earth . . . ?" Straker quickly took one of his own arrows out of the quiver and, fitting it to the bowstring, drew back on the Magnum. His heart was racing with excitement. He was being challenged and had every right to defend himself.

They let fly their steles almost simultaneously, and where the arrows crossed that patch of unusual rays, they seemed to ripple, as if they had entered water. It was an odd sight, and though the man had been aiming

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directly at Straker, the arrow buried itself in a small mound of moss at least ten feet to the right of where the lawyer was standing. His own chrome-plated shaft he could see embedded in a tree, a similar distance from his adversary. It glinted in the sunlight.

Immediately, Straker began running toward the man, before the other could string another arrow, but as he crossed the glade, the figure evaporated. Straker was left, bemused, looking at the space in front of him, empty of any life-form. And the trees seemed to have rearranged their positions. The trunk bearing Straker's arrow was nowhere to be seen.

In the late-afternoon sunlight, Watt Neckley stared at the silver arrow protruding from the trunk of the tree. He picked at a scab on his flea-ridden scalp, puzzled by the encounter with the stranger and his subsequent disappearance. He wondered what his wife, Blodwin, would make of it. Witchery? Or maybe a woodland spirit, escaped from a rock or blasted oak?

At first he had thought that one of Robert Hood's thieves was after the game he had caught, since Watt was traveling backbeare, a hare slung across his shoulders. But the figure's garb was not in keeping with that of the outlaws he knew frequented this part of Sherwood. It had been of a greenish, devilish hue. And that strange helmet it had had on its head! It seemed that this was no meeting with an ordinary man, for did not the other have a mouth full of fire? And he had seemed to waver, as if fashioned from smoke. It had been fear that finally drove Watt to action.

Watt took a hold of the arrow embedded in the trunk of the tree and worked it loose. He balanced it in his hand. How light it was! Yet, clearly it was a silver arrow, for look how it sparkled in the sunshine. What would such an arrow fetch? A very large sum, he had no doubt.

Gradually, through the misty, dull regions of his brain, a realization came to Watt, and he trembled at his own audacity in confronting the stranger. Hern the Hunter! He had challenged the God of the Forest! No wonder his own stele had been brushed aside, as if by an invisible hand. And yet he, Watt, had been allowed to live. The great Hern had deliberately turned his silver arrow, just before it was due to pierce Watt's breast, so that it struck the tree instead. How merciful was the woodland god, to let such a poor creature as Watt live on, after such a brazen challenge.

The point of the silver arrow was very sharp, and Watt used it to lance

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one of his boils, before proceeding through the forest toward his hovel on the edge, just outside the tree line. Perhaps tomorrow he would visit Nottingham and deliver the gleaming prize to the sheriff. He would surely be well rewarded for such an act. However, it would be better not to mention Hern the Hunter. Better to say it had been found, under a bank of moss or in a hollow log. Watt had no desire to be accused of witchcraft and cheated out of any money.

Back in the cottage, Straker studied the thirty-inch-long ash shaft under the light of the lamp, since the day had difficulty penetrating the small windows.

The arrow's stele was roughly hewn, obviously homemade, and its vanes looked to be made of goose feather. The oddest part of it was the head, which was not sharp, but slightly rounded. A blunt arrowhead. Was that a mistake? Had the man put an unfinished arrow in his quiver without realizing it? That seemed the most likely explanation.

And the man himself? Who — or rather, what — was he? The obvious answer was a poacher. A bow is a silent weapon and would not be likely to bring gamekeepers from every part of the woods, but the figure's clothes — a shabby, shapeless shift and leggings — were hardly the dress of a modern poacher, who would be more likely to wear camouflaged combat fatigues. The bow, too, had looked to be roughly fashioned. Then the most curious and not the least important aspect — the man had disappeared into thin air before his eyes! What had that strange trick of the light to do with it all? God, so many unanswered questions. It was pointless trying to apply logic to it all. Somehow logic had to be placed aside and the mind opened to the possibility of paranormal circumstances. But where did one start? It was one thing to realize that some lateral thinking was necessary: quite another to apply it.

Start with the arrow. That was solid, tangible evidence that he could hold in his hand.

A homemade shaft with a blunted head. O.K., begin by assuming that the point had been rounded by intention, by design. Who would use such an arrow?

He paced the room, glancing occasionally at the row of books on his shelves. Burke's *The History of Archery* was the most likely place to look, because the others were mostly about modern weapons. An ash stele

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The arrow was real, solid. Wouldn't a ghost fire ghostly shafts?

fletched with goose feather might be freshly made, but it was hardly modern. He took the book from the shelf and opened it at the chapter headings. "Archery in the Roman Era," "Archery Out of Asia," "The Redskin Archers," "Greece" . . . "Persia" . . . "The Yeomen Bowmen." Where to start? Well, the Romans were in Britain. . . .

He flicked through the pages, finding little to tie in with the figure or his arrow. Right, the next obvious passage. The section on yeomen. Again he flicked through the pages, until he came to some paragraphs on twelfth-century bowmen. Nothing there . . . wait a minute. . . . ". . . *for during this period the arrows were to be blunt if the owner lived in or near the royal forests — apparently an early conservation measure.*"

Good. But where did that get him? A man masquerading as a twelfth-century forester? What about the strange light and disappearing act? A paranormal occurrence — Straker was in no doubt about that. A ghost, then? That seemed the obvious answer. But certain aspects troubled him. Wasn't there supposed to be some kind of charged atmosphere when ghosts appeared? A psychic energy in the air, which one could at least sense, if not feel physically? In any encounters that he had read about, the mortal experienced the unmistakable sensation of being in contact with the spirit world. Straker had felt nothing like that. He had merely witnessed a scene. He had merely participated in an exchange of arrows. And, yes, the arrow was real, solid. Wouldn't a ghost fire ghostly shafts?

He quickly dismissed the idea of a hallucination for the same tangible reason. The stele.

O.K., what did he have so far? A man in twelfth-century garments — a forester — firing arrows made of white ash from a bow that looked as roughly fashioned as the stele itself. A man from the past.

From the past? And what about the light? There had been something strange about the light. A crossing of rays. A kind of bridge. No, not a bridge, a *gap.* A crack, say, in the wall of time.

But he had tried to breach that gap. He had flung himself into it, and nothing had happened: the whole scene had dissolved. Yet the arrows had passed through. Where was the difference?

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Why, that was plain! He was a live thing — animate. The arrows were not. They were inanimate objects!

He sat down, immensely pleased with himself. Such a discovery might be extremely useful to him. After all, dead people were inanimate, weren't they? A corpse was an inanimate object. He could toss Elizabeth's body through the gap in time, and it would be forever out of reach. Without the body, the police would be running around in circles. People went missing every day. Jane would have to wait seven years, the statutory time for a missing person to be presumed dead, before they could marry, but that suited him fine. There was nothing to stop them from sleeping together over that period.

The problem was, would the gap still be there by the time Elizabeth got there? Surely it was not a permanent phenomenon, otherwise the forest workers would have seen it before now. It would be another place of visions — a Lourdes or something. There must be something special about the day itself.

He glanced up at the calendar on the wall. The twenty-first of June. Summer solstice. There were only a few hours left.

He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Elizabeth? Hello, darling, it's me. Can you drive down to the cottage right away? I want you to see something. Yes, I know what I said, but I've changed my mind. I want you to see it today. And anyway, it's lonely out here. . . . What? No, no need to tell anyone. I want to surprise you. . . ."

He put the phone down. She would be there in about two hours. He had time to check the gap before she arrived, just to make sure his hypothesis was indeed correct. He went out, retracing his steps of that morning. Eventually he came to the spot where the exchange had taken place. The weird light patterns were still in evidence. He picked up a rock and threw it at the warped, shimmering scene. It seemed to turn slightly, and go off at an angle, when it struck the crossed rays. He poked a long sapling through, half in, half out. There was a refractive effect, as if it were water on the other side. That explained the reason why both arrows had missed. Neither expert archer had allowed for refraction of the light.

Watt Neckley sat on the hard-packed earth floor of his hovel with the silver arrow across his knees. He was feeling troubled. In the far corner of the room, a huge bundle of rags was snoring rhythmically: his wife,

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Blodwin. There was the smell of boiled cabbage mingling with the less refined odor of stale sweat in the interior of the hovel, but Watt was not troubled by this, nor by the boar-like snorts of his wife. These were normal, pleasant things. He was worried because his wife had told him he should be ashamed of himself, and he agreed with her. Hern the Hunter had given Watt a magnificent gift, a precious arrow, but what had the serf given the god in exchange? A common ash stele. That was indeed something to trouble a man.

He scratched his genitals through the rough cloth and tried to think. What could he give the god to show his appreciation? He had little of any value. Watt could never, of course, match Hern's generosity, but there was surely something that he owned that would reflect his gratitude?

One of the chickens wandered into the doorway, pecking at a cabbage stalk. It glanced at Watt, then went away, clucking softly to itself.

A chicken?

Not a chicken. Perhaps a deer or a boar — but the killing of the former was a punishable offense; and attempting to kill the latter, extremely dangerous.

He stroked the silver arrow, enjoying the feel of its smooth surface. Suddenly a stranger entered Watt's head. One of those that visited too rarely. It was an idea.

Now, said the stranger, what if you were to go and see your brother and offer to share the proceeds of the sale or reward in return for a favor? Tom had been away at the wars, the Crusades, and had brought one or two things back with him. He had had to leave his arm behind — the heathens had taken that — so it was only fair that he should have looted a little. Not that Tom had brought home a great deal. You can't carry much with one arm, and those with two would take the loot away from you in any case. But there was something that Hern might like. Something that wasn't a great deal of use to Tom, these one-armed days.

Blodwin broke wind as Watt crept out of the hovel. He thought, idly, that she might like a new pot. The rabbit stew had not tasted the same since she had used the old one to boil her clothes in. Oh yes, he knew about *that*. There wasn't much you could hide from Watt Neckley. He knew all about the clothes washing, and he knew her reasons. He knew, all right. He knew why these fanciful ideas came to women when Robert Hood's rogues were roaming around the woods, looking for pretty wenches.

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She had even tried to burn out the warts on her chin, with a red-hot twig, to beautify herself. Oh yes. Watt Neckley wasn't stupid. . . .

"This way, Elizabeth, through here."

"But John, it'll be dark soon. Where are we going?"

Straker's heart was racing with excitement — or was it apprehension? Murdering one's wife was not an easy thing to do. But he was gripped by a kind of compulsion now.

"I want to show you something. Come on. It won't take long."

She was so damnably slow. He pushed aside a branch and entered the glade. There it was, still shimmering, but darkly now, as if it were a moonlit night on the other side. Perhaps it was? That would explain the crossed rays. Different times of day. So when would the gap disappear? In the forester's time, or Straker's? He had to move quickly. Where was that stupid woman?

"Elizabeth!"

"I'm coming. I'm coming. These brambles are scratching my legs."

She sounded breathless.

She would soon be breathless for good.

Straker unslung the Magnum with its Jäger sights. It had a thirty-five-pound draw in weight. The arrow should go right through her rib cage. He fitted a stainless-steel shaft and waited for Elizabeth to emerge from the undergrowth.

Shit! Who was that? Oh Christ, the bloody woodsman was back, on the other side, staring at him.

Straker waved angrily at the man and shook his fist. He wanted to indicate that he was in no mood for another exchange of arrows. Then he turned, to concentrate on the spot where Elizabeth would enter the glade.

Hern the Hunter was swathed in golden light. There was a moon, and Watt had had little difficulty in finding the place again, but that was not moonlight around Hern. It was the aura of a god. Hallowed light. See how his bow dazzled, as if on fire! Watt was awed, especially when Hern shook an angry fist in his direction. That was because the god had been given a common wooden stele in exchange for a silver one. Watt would soon put that misunderstanding right.

Watt took from his quiver the black Saracen arrow given him by his

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brother Tom. It was not as precious as silver, being made of some wood called *ebon*, but many people had admired it, not the least for the straightness of the stele.

He fitted it to his waxed bowstring and drew back on the six-foot yew war-weapon, also his brother's. A good arrow should be sent from a good bow.

The woodland god's back was to him, and Hern would not see the arrow coming and be able to ward it off, so Watt aimed a good three yards to the god's left, at a tree stump.

Just as he released the shaft, he saw the faerie queen step into the light that her master was shedding over the woodland scene.

The black arrow thudded into Straker's back, just below the left shoulder blade, destroying his aim. His own shaft skidded off a low branch, missing Elizabeth by two feet. Straker was able to look down, just long enough to see the bloody barbed arrowhead that protruded from his breast, before he sank to his knees and died. On his short journey to the earth, his finger reached up to touch the wicked-looking point that broke the twelfth-century laws of that part of Sherwood Forest. As a barrister, he might have appreciated the irony of the situation, had he not been spilling his lifeblood onto the humus at the time.

Elizabeth screamed.

A figure ran out of the darkening glade, silently, and into the black heart of the woodland.

Coming Soon

Next month: P.E. Cunningham returns with a new novella about the planet New Eden and its inhabitants, the huge and telepathic pterosaurian reptiles. "Purpose" is the feature story in the July issue, on sale June 1.

Soon: Watch for news about our big 40th anniversary October issue, featuring new stories by Gene Wolfe, Thomas M. Disch and Gregory Benford, to name just a few. More news next month.

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Kristine Rusch has been a freelance writer for several years — with stories in Amazing, Aboriginal *and others — and is also the editor of* Pulphouse, *a hardback SF magazine that is produced in her hometown of Eugene, Oregon. Her first F&SF story is a chiller with a musical background; she says it was started "the day after I saw Isaac Stern in concert here in Eugene . . ."*

Phantom

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

1.

HE PUSHED OPEN the auditorium door *(the whisper of old pine echoed in the silence as, up onstage, silver glistened)* and stood with his hands on the cushioned metal seat at the end of Aisle Z. Someone had carpeted the great room and added false wooden arches. The hall's perfect acoustics *(a single, startled grunt resounded in the stillness)* had been sacrificed to an ignorant remodeler's whim.

Martin stepped over the seat and then sat down. The other rows were well spaced and curved down toward the stage. From this spot he would be able to see everything clearly. Not that he wanted to. Being in the Dixon left him with a vague feeling of unease. He could see Terry standing next to the piano, his hair combed back in a greasy ducktail that Elvis Presley would have been proud of. Terry haunted the Dixon for Martin, and so did a knife, a long, slender knife streaked with blood.

Martin ran his hand along the soft woven gray and pink seat cover.

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The hall was quiet. He would have thought that people would be working frantically, finishing last-minute projects before the performer arrived. But Martin hadn't seen anyone since he let himself in the back door. He still found it amazing that, with all the recent concerns about murders at the Dixon, Wellman hadn't bothered to have the locks changed. That would have been the first thing — that had been the first thing — Martin had done.

He sighed and closed his eyes. If he strained hard enough, he could almost hear the feathers of former performances still floating in the air: Rubinstein caressing the *Moonlight* like a lover, Andre attacking the *Trumpet Voluntary* with a brightness Clarke never imagined, and Rampal teasing the puckishness out of Mozart. Tonight, though, tonight would be the best. Tonight was Stern.

Isaac Stern, perhaps the world's greatest violinist. But he was more than a great musician. With his gnomelike body and dancing eyebrows, Stern embodied passion, passion that he poured back into the auditorium through his violin. Martin had seen only one other performer give so much emotion to the music. Arthur Rubinstein, thirty years ago to the very day.

Arthur Rubinstein. Isaac Stern. Martin patted the seat and then relinquished it. He would have to sit near an exit closer to the stage.

2.

WILL THE PHANTOM OF DIXON THEATER STRIKE AGAIN?

(Rockridge) — Security guards patrol the Dixon Theater as classical music buffs buy last-minute tickets to this Oregon town's first concert in nearly a decade. Henry Longfellow Wellman, the theater's owner, hired the guards to prevent another murder.

Thirty years ago, after a performance by pianist Arthur Rubinstein, stagehand Terrance G. Hodgeson was stabbed to death on Dixon's stage. Ten years later a worker found an unconscious Rowena Klingdest the day after trumpeter Maurice Andre appeared on the Dixon stage. In the late seventies, following a concert by flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal, the Phantom stabbed his final victim, Lorili Lee Anders.

No one knows who has committed the killings. Some have nicknamed

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the killer the Dixon Phantom because of his ability to appear and disappear so. . . .

Rowena crumpled the newspaper and threw it back at Jon. She hated it when the newspapers dredged up that old story. "Piece of garbage," she said. "You'd think I don't have enough to worry about." She flicked up the switch that illuminated the lights around the stage. "'Central lighting,' he says. 'Makes for more intimacy,' he says. 'No spots,' he says. Christ, would you look at that, Jon?" She swept her hand toward the big glass window of the booth overlooking the stage. "Looks like a goddamn cavern out there."

"I've been wondering why Wellman hired all those security guards."

Rowena yanked the cover off the Neotek and then looked at her assistant. He was sitting on a stool, staring at the newspaper, one foot resting on a bar and the other barely touching the floor. His thick black bangs hung over his eyes, and she could see the frown of concentration reflected in the narrowness of his mouth.

"I don't know anything about running sound on a solo violinist," she said. This *Phantom of the Opera* stuff had her annoyed. If the past two stabbings had been done by a copycat killer like the police believed, then the newspapers were just making things worse by publishing articles on the incidents before Stern's performance. "We never had to do it in Seattle. But this hall dumps sound so bad that I'm afraid people in the back won't be able to —"

Jon wasn't looking at her. He was still studying the newspaper. Rowena yanked it from him and shoved it in the trash.

"What did Stern say to you when he was here?" she asked.

"They mention you in that article, you know."

Rowena could feel her lips tighten, and wondered if she would get age lines that turned the corners of her mouth downward. "I know," she said.

"I would think you wouldn't be here tonight."

"And who would run the boards? You? You haven't paid attention all day."

"I just thought that —"

"You thought wrong." She winced at her own tone. She sounded shrewish, like she had those last few months in Seattle, just before her divorce. She took a deep breath and decided to be conciliatory. "Let's put this Phantom shit away and get busy, all right? Tell me what Stern said."

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"He said the piano was out of tune."

Rowena punched the *on* button for the Neotek. Feedback squealed into the little booth. Shivers ran up her back, and she stifled an urge to clasp her hands over her ears as she pulled down all of the sound buttons. The VU meters slowly eased back into black as the feedback quit, but the effects remained. Her ears rang, and she felt as if she were cringing inside herself. Sometimes she thought that if feedback continued long enough, something inside — the part that appreciated harmony and beautiful music — would explode.

"Danny tuned the damn thing this morning," she said. Her voice sounded hollow after the violence of the feedback.

"Wellman turned on the air-conditioning at noon. Change in temperature made the thing off enough that the old man got angry about it."

Rowena bit back a reply. A violinist of Stern's reputation was not, despite his age, an old man. She tried to make her words as soft as possible. "Isaac Stern is a great violinist. Since we're going to be working with him, we have to show him some respect."

"Yeah." Jon looked out the window at the empty stage. "It's just that he comes on like everything has to be exactly perfect. This isn't Carnegie Hall. We do our best."

She nodded. "But we can get the piano retuned for him. Why don't you call Danny back? We'll see if we can get this settled before curtain."

And, she thought, bending over the Neotek, *we'll see if we can get this settled, too.* They rarely used the expensive sound board, and the instant feedback had surprised her. Someone had been monkeying with the controls, and that added to her annoyance. She was the only one authorized to touch the machine.

The door clicked shut behind her as Jon let himself out of the booth. She punched the speakers back on, knowing that, with the touch of a button, the sound of the entire theater could come alive for her in that little room.

3.

DANNY STEVENS clutched the red curtain dividing the wings from the stage and glared at the piano as if it were an enemy. It had taken him nearly an hour to tune the damn thing that morning. He would work, feel as if he had tuned it, and then hit

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middle C. The sound would slide away from the perfect pitch as if the piano were deliberately untuning itself.

And now they were asking him to do it again.

He ran his gnarled hands along his faded pants. The problem wasn't the air-conditioning, he thought as he walked across the wooden floorboards that separated him from the piano. The problem was that the damn piano didn't want to play that night.

Not that Danny could blame it. The piano had seen some awful sights over the years. A murder and two stabbings, and who knows what else that happened backstage, night after night.

He pulled back the bench and sat down. The piano was a strange instrument, but a good one. It had a richness of tone he had never heard before, and would probably never hear again. He believed the piano was a hybrid or an experimental model made by a company that had never survived. No name marred the black finish; no trademark hid inside the frame. The piano had qualities of all the best pianos and the identifying marks of none.

Without depressing any keys, he ran his fingers across the board. The piano hated classical concerts. Fortunately, none of the big orchestras or quartets had asked to use it. Only the soloists. And for them the piano never stayed tuned. But it loved the local performers. Its tone was pure for the annual children's musical and the high school productions. It faded into nearly nothing for the glee club performances, and it was the star of the local jazz band. But try to tune it for a recital where the entire program had nothing more modern than Tchaikovsky, and the piano would refuse, every time.

It had had no trouble playing for the first soloist. Danny had been just a boy then, barely twenty, when Rubinstein had played the Dixon. As a condition of his performance, he demanded that they provide him with a "decent" piano. And so Martin, who had owned the place at the time, ran out and bought the piano, even though the theater really couldn't afford it. Two nights later, Rubinstein played the hell out of the instrument. Danny remembered thinking, as he sat in the audience with tears streaking his face, that the piano would never sound as good again. And, in his own way, he had been right.

He played octave C's and winced at the dissonance. No arguing with Stern. The piano had slid out of tune again.

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Danny tilted his head, played octaves, and began to tune the piano. He couldn't remember if he had had to fight with the piano before Rubinstein's performance. He remembered tuning it, thinking that he hadn't touched a piano that fine since Old Lady Steinglass had passed away two years before. The piano had felt like a supple woman in his hands, and Danny thought he had fallen in love.

He wouldn't have fallen in love with a recalcitrant piano.

That meant the problem had started after the murder, after Martin had found Terry sprawled on the stage, knife pinning him to the floorboards. Blood had spattered everything, and Martin had called Danny to clean it off of the keyboard. Danny remembered how tenderly he had cleaned, making sure that each drop disappeared.

But the piano hadn't been the same since.

"Hey, you!"

Danny jumped. His hands slipped and fell onto the keyboard, sending jangled, out-of-tune notes into the rows of empty seats. He turned around and saw one of the security guards glowering at him. The man was big, so big that he strained the seams of his shiny blue uniform. A pair of handcuffs dangled at his waist like a gun.

"What are you doing here, old man?"

"I — " Danny cleared his throat. "I'm tuning the piano."

"Let's see your clearance."

"I — um, Rowena called me, and Jon let me in the back." Danny took a deep breath to calm himself. The man frightened him. "I was here this morning."

"I wasn't." The guard walked over to the piano. "I need to see your clearance."

"I don't know what clearance is," Danny said truthfully. He was beginning to shake.

"Then I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Danny shot a frightened glance up at the booth. Rowena was bent over a piece of equipment, her entire body in profile. Danny *(flashed on a memory: Rowena — a young Rowena, barely seventeen — lying beside the piano, her hand leaving a trail of blood down the polished wood. Her clothes hung in tatters around her body, and her left breast rose like a small island of flesh out of her mutilated chest. He had screamed, and the sound of his voice had reverberated through the hall, making her eyelids*

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flutter) stood up. He couldn't attract her attention without walking on the catwalks and messing with the lights.

"Can't we talk to Rowena?" he asked.

The guard shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. You need clearance to be in the building. I can't let you be here without it. I can take you outside, and you would have to wait there while I talk to the lady myself."

"I'm tuning the piano!" Danny could hear a note of hysterical anger in his voice and wondered where it came from. It would probably have been easier to go outside and wait while the giant talked to Rowena. But Danny didn't want to.

He turned and slammed his fingers onto the keyboard, playing the opening notes of Grieg's Piano Concerto in A Minor. The heavy chords filled the auditorium, and he tried not to flinch at the horrible off-pitch sounds. The guard grabbed his shoulder — tightly — and Danny stopped, feeling frustrated.

"Danny?" Rowena's voice through the booth intercom, sounding hollow and almost inhuman.

It had worked. Danny let out the air he had been holding in his lungs. "Rowena, this guy wants to throw me out. Says I need clearance."

"Oh, is it that time already? I forgot. He's clear, Mike. Send him up, and I'll give him the slip."

The guard let go of Danny's shoulder. "Sorry," the man said.

"Yeah." Danny shrugged his shoulders as if to get the feeling of the man's hand off his skin. Danny walked to the edge of the stage and climbed down into the pit, then made his way up the aisle toward the booth. He had a strange feeling, as if he could see multiple time layers all at once. So many times he had walked up that aisle, past wooden chairs, past metal chairs, and now, past these padded things that were ever so comfortable and had somehow destroyed the Dixon's sound. In his memory, his footsteps resounded along the aisle floor. But only in his memory.

He went out into the lobby, then opened the little, unobtrusive door that hid the stairway to the booth. He loved the old theater. He had been in some of the new ones, with their space-age technology, booths located in the center back where the good, cheap seats used to be, and had been thankful that Rockridge still had the Dixon. Somehow those new theaters, pretty as they were, lacked the heart of an older theater, lacked the feeling

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of time stretching and contracting as if the building itself were a sort of time machine.

He stepped into the booth. Rowena was leaning against a stool, staring at the stage below. When he shut the door, she turned and handed him a slip of paper.

"Sorry I forgot, Danny," she said. She kept her eyes averted, as she always had after the stabbing, as if she couldn't forget that he had been the one who found her nearly dead on the stage below them. "They added the clearance shit at noon. Thought it would be safer or something. I think it's a pain in the butt."

Danny took his paper and shoved it in his pocket. "I was afraid you wouldn't hear me."

"I was playing with the Neotek or I wouldn't have."

He wanted to reach over and touch her, to reassure himself that she was real. He had never done that, never touched Rowena, never really proven to himself that she had survived the attack. Not that he had touched her before, either. She had been too exuberant, filled with too much life. He used to love to come to the Dixon, just to watch Rowena prance around as if she had been born to the stage. But after they let her out of the hospital, she had given up acting, given up everything except the hidden part of theater, the lights and the sound, performed by a magician behind a cloak of darkness.

"Thanks," Danny said again, feeling awkward. "I better get back down again and finish."

"Will you be around tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Good. That piano's so damn fussy, and who knows if Wellman will monkey with the air-conditioning again. You can watch from here if you want."

Danny stared at her. She was built slender and tough, with long, glistening black hair that hung to the center of her back. He would have loved to be in the booth with her, watching her fingers play the board as if it were a baby grand. But she would have to look at him, to actually see him as a living, breathing human being.

"I got tickets," he said. "But thanks."

Tickets. He let himself out of the booth and allowed himself a moment of self-pity. He was taking Nancy again, because there was no one else.

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Nancy, the prude, who had never let him sleep with her, not in two years of irregular dates and halfhearted efforts on his part. He supposed it was his fault. He had never made an effort with women that really attracted him — women like Rowena. She was nearly fifteen years younger than he was, and battle-scarred. Ever since Len had left, she looked as if she didn't care, as if no one could get in.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and leaned against the railing. He was alone. She was alone. And he embarrassed her. Those three facts were all that mattered.

4.

CHRISSY SWISHED her satin skirt about her knees. She clutched the plastic cup filled with wine and leaned against one of the pillars as she waited for Robert. Such a beautiful evening, a magical evening, like a prom, only better. She took a sip of the wine and savored its alcoholic taste as it slid down the back of her throat.

Robert came out of the bathroom and tugged the edges of his sleeves as he walked. He looked so elegant with his silver-black hair and deep tan accented by his suit. A number of women stopped talking and stared as he walked past. Robert ignored them as he strode purposefully toward Chrissy. She smiled to herself as she watched him walk, the swing of his broad shoulders, the curve of his body as it tapered down into a pair of long, supple legs. Perhaps tonight she would see the entire thing naked, not just glimpses in the back seat of a car.

"You look delicious," he said as he stopped beside her.

She made a purring noise in the back of her throat and put her head on his shoulder. Robert was special. She didn't care that he was so much older. He seemed to like treating her as if she were an adult. He ordered wine for her although she wasn't legally supposed to drink it, and took her to see a famous violinist that no one had ever heard of. She loved the excuse to wear her satin. She knew that the wide, knee-length black skirt with the full waist, the soft white blouse with black trim and the flowery white stockings made her look like a model. Her sister's black heels had been a nice touch, but almost unnecessary.

Robert ran a finger down the side of her blouse. "You ever been to a concert before?"

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"U2 up in Portland," she said.

He chuckled. "No, I mean a real concert."

"One like this?" She surveyed the lobby. The principal was talking to the mayor. Both wore dark suits, although not as nicely tailored as Robert's. Three of her dad's bowling buddies stood off in one corner, watching their overdressed wives gossip about the stabbings. The orchestra teacher had a crowd of kids around her. Some even wore jeans. One boy caught Chrissy staring at him, and he toasted her with an imaginary glass. She snuggled even closer to Robert. "No, I never have."

"Then there are a couple of things you should know." He put his hand flat on her back. She could feel his palm burning through layers of satin. "God," he whispered suddenly. "You're not wearing a bra."

"I'm not wearing panties, either." She smiled up at him. His eyes had that smoky look they usually got before he turned the car off down a side street and tugged at her jeans.

"Chrissy —" he breathed, and she willed him to say it, this time, to make the evening perfect. *I love you, Chrissy. I love you.*

She stood on her toes and pressed her face even closer to his. "Yes Robert?"

"Jesus, girl." He twined his fingers around the back of her neck, and she thought he was going to kiss her right there, in front of the principal, the mayor, and everybody — but then a bell sounded, and Robert pulled back. "Time to go in."

"Oh, is that what that means?" She tried to will his gaze to remain on her, but he had looked away. He took her hand and pulled her toward the center doors where people were lining up.

They got in line behind an overweight couple that Chrissy didn't recognize. Real pearls hung around the woman's fleshy neck. Robert gripped Chrissy's elbow. "Now," he said, "there's etiquette to a classical music performance."

She watched him talk, letting the sentences about when to clap and when not to clap flow through her as if she were hollow. She made sure that her expression was wide-eyed and innocent. He liked that look, although she didn't practice it often.

"What do I have to do?" Chrissy asked.

Robert watched her for a moment, then a smile that didn't reach his eyes crossed his face. "Nothing, honey. Just clap when I do."

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"O.K." Chrissy rocked back on her heels, then looked at the line behind them. Rows and rows of people wearing their very best clothes. She wondered, as the line started moving forward, why no one had come alone. Apparently, the etiquette Robert had talked about included a date.

Robert handed their tickets to Tammi Markston, who stood at the door. Tammi handed the stubs back, along with two programs. She leaned around Robert and giggled. "Hi, Chrissy."

Chrissy made herself smile. She hated it when Tammi acted so dumb. "How're you, Tam?"

"Not as good as you, looks like."

Robert put his hand against the small of her back and pushed her forward. Chrissy had to walk quickly to keep from tumbling off the shoes. "Sometimes I forget just how young you are," he said with an edge of irritation in his voice.

Chrissy wanted to grab at his sleeve and tell him that she wasn't young, not really, but she knew that was the wrong thing to do. She stepped down the first stair in the aisle, pretending that she was ten years older, but just as beautiful.

Robert stopped them five rows away from the stage.

"Great seats," Chrissy said.

"I would have liked them a few rows farther back," Robert said as he sat down, "but this hall dumps sound so badly now that I didn't dare."

Chrissy gazed up at the crystal chandelier, reflecting prisms of light around the auditorium. Then she turned, tucked one foot underneath her thighs, and watched the people trail down the rows.

"Don't gawk, Chrissy."

"I'm not gawking," she said. "I'm memorizing."

Robert sighed and leaned a little away from her. Chrissy watched him out of the corner of her eye and frowned. Sometimes he seemed so happy to be with her, and sometimes he acted as if he couldn't stand her at all. She settled back in her seat and tried not to move while she waited for the concert to begin.

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5.

THE HOUSE lights dimmed, leaving the full stage lights illuminating the piano. Martin glanced up at the booth, but he could see nothing. Rowena knew what she was doing, yet it seemed odd to him to give a soloist full lighting instead of spots. Spots were more intimate.

He shrugged and leaned back in his chair. There was nothing he could do. He turned slightly and stuck his feet into the aisle. He had chosen a seat closer to the exit, for what reason he really did not want to examine. Seat 1, Row D. He had told himself that the sound would be better from there, but he really wasn't certain. What seemed more likely was that he offered himself a quick escape if something awful happened.

A wave of applause rippled through the auditorium, and he felt a band of excitement tighten around his stomach. A small rotund man with the face of a leprechaun; a taller, thin man; and a woman walked in stage right. The leprechaun carried a violin. Martin smiled. He had never seen Isaac Stern in person before.

The woman sat in a chair beside the piano. The taller man folded himself onto the piano bench and hit middle C. Stern played the note on his violin. Martin winced. The piano was nearly a quarter-step off. He certainly wouldn't have let it get so out of tune before a concert.

Stern tried to tune his violin to the piano. Just when Martin thought Stern was going to give up, the violinist moved the music stand over, and played the opening notes of a Beethoven sonata. Martin resisted the urge to consult his program. It had to be Beethoven. No other composer had such fullness of sound. And Stern. Stern himself became the music. The man's entire body flowed to the music. His eyebrows rose with joy and then fell again as the piece ebbed into a sadness. Martin felt himself move with the music, ebbing and flowing just as Stern did. Music was better than *(a single, startled grunt resounding in the stillness)* sex and money rolled together. For a brief moment, he wished he still owned the Dixon, but then he remembered seeing Terry pinned to the stage, the knife sticking up from his chest, blood dripping from the piano. Martin had run up onto the stage, but Terry was dead. And Martin's love for the Dixon had died, too. That was the difference. He could visit her and remember how he felt. But he could never, ever love her again.

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6.

DANNY HATED Beethoven. He sat stiffly through the piece, feeling as if he were being crushed, and trying not to let anger at the piano overwhelm him. He knew where he would be during intermission. Onstage with the damn piano, trying to make the thing sound good. It was embarrassing to have to tune a piano three times in one day. People would think that he wasn't doing his job, when it really was the piano's fault.

Nancy started applauding and Danny applauded with her, happy that the Beethoven had ended. Stern bowed, then looked at his accompanist. Danny stiffened. Would they call him now? Before intermission even started?

He could imagine himself climbing onstage, with Stern, the accompanist, and the page turner standing back as he hurriedly tried to tune the piano. The audience would rustle in their seats, the piano would slide out of tune, and Danny would get angrier and angrier —

The high, clear sound of a violin brought him out of his reverie. Stern had eased into a Schubert sonata. Danny relaxed. The piano seemed to like Schubert. It was warming up to the romance, the richness in the music.

Stern caressed his violin like a lover. Danny watched and envied the other man as he poured himself into his music. Once Danny had wanted to pour himself into music like that. He had played the piano once, and still did, but lacked the very thing that made Stern so great: the ability to make music live.

Shivers ran up Danny's back. Good shivers of the kind he heard too rarely over the years. The last time had been Rampal, making love to his flute onstage.

The music continued, crescendoed into an almost dancelike ferocity. Danny felt the magic of Stern's violin descend from the stage, reaching out to caress them all.

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7.

ROWENA BROUGHT up the house lights. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and watched as, row by row, the audience stood. Intermission. Danny got up and headed backstage. She swung her chair around and shut down the Neotek so that the remaining audience members, the ones who were listening to the sound system instead of pure Stern, wouldn't hear him tune the piano yet again.

Then she took a deep breath and stretched. Her entire body ached. She was too tense. All evening she had been telling herself the tenseness came from carrying sound on a soloist, that it was a delicate task, difficult to balance, but she knew she was lying. She hadn't been in the Dixon for a classical concert since Maurice Andre, twenty years ago. The night she had been stabbed.

The booth door swung open, and Rowena gasped. Jon stepped in.

"Jonny, you're supposed to be downstairs."

"I know," he said, "but I think we have a problem with the piano."

She glanced on the stage. Danny was leaned over the piano, the accompanist and the page turner both beside him. Danny was gesticulating wildly. "What?"

"It won't tune."

"Obviously."

"No, I mean, it won't tune at all."

He stood behind her as if waiting for her to solve the problem. "Well," she said. "Let Danny work on it. I can't do anything about the piano."

Jon nodded. He started out the door, when Rowena added, "Next time use the headset."

He tapped the one he wore around his neck, the cord clutched tightly in his hand. "I tried. You weren't answering."

Rowena started guiltily. She had pulled hers off a second before she upped the houselights. Headsets made her feel isolated, even though they gave lovely renditions of her performance with Stern. She wanted the connection to the rest of the world quickly.

"Sorry," she said.

He didn't reply, but turned and disappeared down the stairs. Rowena had to get up to close the door behind him. Then she turned back and looked out the glass. Danny was there alone again, working with the

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piano. Something about that piano bothered her, something about the way it sounded. It had been out of tune since the night she saw Andre. Danny had been up on the stage, monkeying with it, and Martin, the old owner, had also been there trying to help. She had sat near the exit and listened, hoping that someday someone would go to the same trouble to make sure her performances sounded as brilliant.

She made a whispery laughing sound in the back of her throat. Great joke on herself. She had come out of that night a techie herself, no longer whole enough to stand onstage alone.

She checked her watch, then reached over and sounded the return bell. With both hands, she picked up the headset and slid it over her ears.

". . . do much about that piano," Jon was saying. "Rowena?"

She adjusted the tiny mike and said, "I'm here, Jon. What now?"

"Danny can't do much with that piano. What should I do?"

She thought for a moment. Delaying the concert was the worst thing she could do. Stern was on a tight schedule. He was taking a commuter flight not an hour after the concert ended. "Tell Stern he'll have to live with it — and apologize."

"I get all the great jobs," Jon muttered. She heard his side go dead. She pulled the headset back, turned the Neotek back on, and slowly began to dim the lights.

8.

CHRISSY TRIED not to sigh. She had sighed too many times already. Robert was getting annoyed. She ran a hand down the satin sleeve of her blouse and tried to imagine what it would be like after the concert, just her and Robert in his apartment. Maybe he would give her a little more wine, and as he went into the kitchen to get it, she would take off all of her clothes, stack them neatly in a chair across the room, and then arrange herself for him on the couch. The smoky look would come back to his eyes, and everything would be all right.

Applause started around her, but Chrissy dutifully waited until Robert started clapping before she did. The old man was coming back out onstage, clutching his violin, and he looked upset, too. These concerts definitely weren't fun. They were boring.

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The old man walked to the edge of the stage and raised his hand. The applause slowly died.

"The Weber —" He sounded like he was talking to a group of children. "— is bits of light dancing through darkness. It is a very delicate piece. I beg your indulgence during it. The slightest noise could ruin the music. So please, no coughing, no whispering. Just music."

The applause started again. This time, Chrissy clapped without waiting for Robert. Slapping her hands together seemed to be the only thing to alleviate the boredom. The old man poised his bow over the violin, and everyone stopped clapping. Robert leaned forward. He had an intense expression on his face, one Chrissy had never seen before. She took the opportunity to sigh, knowing that Robert would glare at her if she sighed during the music itself.

Suddenly the old man started to play. He hit the bow across the strings in short, choppy movements. The sounds reminded Chrissy of the time her brother had tried the violin. The family had finally made him quit to stop the squealing.

Someone coughed behind her. She cheered silently. Robert was staring so intently that he didn't even seem to notice. Chrissy sighed again, and then settled back, wishing that the concert would end.

9.

DANNY UNCLENCHED his fists when the Weber ended. He hated that atonal stuff. It didn't matter if the piano was in tune or not. No one could tell. And that light-in-the-darkness business was there just so that people would think that they understood it. Give him Schubert or Tchaikovsky or Schumann any time, and he would be perfectly happy.

As people clapped around him, Danny checked the program. Mozart. Good. Maybe that would calm him. He had been angry since intermission. The piano wouldn't tune. She had a personality all her own. He knew it, and the piano knew it. And during classical concerts, they were at war.

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10.

MARTIN WAITED until Stern had finished his second encore before slipping backstage. The security guards weren't worth their money; Martin could tell that much. He had entered the building in the afternoon, using one of the side doors, and they hadn't caught him. Now he was backstage, the scene of the crimes, near a world-famous violinist, and they still hadn't checked his ID.

Martin leaned against the wall near the ladder up the catwalk. The stagehand passed him without even giving him a second glance. Martin watched as Stern began the Kreisler. In just a few minutes, the concert would be over and the trouble would begin.

He had been out in the house during the first murder, picking up programs, adjusting seats, when he saw that flash of silver on the stage. He turned in time to see Terry fall, to hear the grunt that would be the last sound that Terry ever made. Martin had chased over the entire theater that night, as had the cops, and they never found anything. Not even footprints in the mud outside. Nothing to show that person or persons unknown had even entered the theater. Martin himself had been under suspicion for a while, until the cops found someone who had seen Martin drop his programs and run up to the stage to see if he could save his stagehand.

The frustration from that night rolled back at him. He hadn't been able to save Terry or that other little girl or Rowena. He had been to all three concerts and, at all three, had failed to catch — to even see — anything out of the ordinary.

He had started studying the Dixon to see if there were old legends that someone was trying to revive. None. None at all. At least, not until the night Arthur Rubinstein played onstage. Not until Martin had experienced a true success.

The applause startled him. It sounded louder in the back for some reason. He hadn't even heard the piece end. During the noise, Martin reached over and grabbed the railing on the ladder. He climbed quickly, efficiently, remembering the steps as if he had climbed them the day before. By the time the applause ended, he was in the very center of the catwalk, lying in a prone position, where he had a perfect view of the

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stage. And there he saw it, easing out of the piano in wisps, the shape of a man clutching a knife.

11.

IN THE seconds between the end of the applause and the rise of the houselights, Danny shoved his way past the three people at the end of his row. He had to get backstage, had to apologize to Stern for that awful piano. Then he would go to the piano itself and see what was causing the problem. If the instrument was in tune, he would *(bash it)* do something to it — maybe even get Wellman to sell the damn thing.

He took the side stairs onto the stage and then opened the door leading to the back, sending a well of light into the audience. A security guard stopped him, but Danny fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the clearance Rowena had given him earlier. The guard waved him on.

Danny got to the edge of the wings just as Stern was entering them. "Mr. Stern," Danny said. "I'm the piano tuner. I just wanted to apologize for the —"

The look Stern shot him was so full of anger that Danny had to take a step back. The accompanist smiled half-apologetically and waited until Stern disappeared into his dressing room. "He wants everything to be perfect or he doesn't enjoy the music," the accompanist said.

"It wasn't my fault," Danny said. "The piano —"

"Yes, I know. I watched you try to tune it during intermission. The piano does seem to have a mind of its own. Perhaps a new instrument is in order?"

Danny nodded. A new piano would help the Dixon more than anything else. He watched the accompanist head back to the dressing rooms, and felt both relieved and embarrassed. Damn piano. He turned and stared at the gleaming black instrument, sitting alone onstage. The love affair was finally over. Danny didn't think he could hate anything as much as he did that piano.

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12.

ROWENA SLOWLY brought up the houselights. Her hands were shaking. The concert was over; the waiting had begun. She watched as the audience stood up, turned back, and grabbed programs. The swell of conversation buzzed into her headset, and she leaned back to shut off the Neotek, but thought the better of it. The security guards would be handling the exits, guarding the doors to the stage, keeping an eye on Stern himself. No one would be watching the stage.

She punched the buttons turning on the speakers, then adjusted the headset so that it covered only one ear. She would be able to hear Jon if he called, but she could also hear the theater, hear strange noises that no one else picked up.

The auditorium was emptying out. Her shivering increased. She turned her back on the stage, then picked up the logs and a pen, filling everything out before she had to go downstairs and help Jon.

13.

ROBERT GRABBED Chrissy's hand and tugged her into the aisle. But instead of going up the stairs toward the back of the theater, he went toward the stage itself. Chrissy stumbled twice trying to keep up with him, and she crashed into a middle-aged couple who glared at her furiously.

"Sorry," she said. "Honest." But by the time the words had left her mouth, she was already well past the couple. She tried to pull on Robert's hand. "Where are we going?" she asked, but he didn't answer.

He went up the side stairs where that little man had gone just before they brought the lights up, and stepped backstage. A security guard stopped them.

"Clearance?"

Robert frowned. He had clearly never encountered anything like this before. "I'm Robert Ashly. I used to own the Dixon."

The guard shrugged. "I still need clearance."

A good-looking guy wearing headphones with a little microphone trailing toward his mouth stopped and watched. Finally he walked over to

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them. Chrissy smoothed her skirt and smiled at him, but the guy didn't notice.

"I'll vouch for him, Tom," the guy said. "Mr. Ashly gave me my first job here. Sweeping, remember, sir?"

Robert nodded, although Chrissy could tell that he didn't remember. "Thank you," he said.

"And I take it this is your date?" the guy asked. He smiled at Chrissy. "You haven't changed, Mr. Ashly."

A slight flush rose in Robert's cheeks. He tucked Chrissy's hand under his arm and led her forward, past cord and wires and drapes into an area lined with doors. He stopped at the one with a guard posted out front and knocked.

The old man opened the door. He looked tired, and sweat streaked his face. "Yes?" The question was clipped, almost a dismissal all by itself.

"Mr. Stern," Robert said in his most authoritative voice. "My name is Robert Ashly, Jr. My father used to play with the New York Philharmonic —"

"Bob! Yes. You're little Bobby."

"Yessir."

The old man stood back and held the door open. "Come in, come in. I have only a moment, but. . . ."

Robert turned to Chrissy. "Wait for me here."

She frowned as the door slammed in her face. The guard looked at her with bemusement and then smiled. "Fathers," he said.

It took a minute before she realized that he thought Robert was her father. She threw back her shoulders and made herself look taller. "He's my fiancé," she lied, although she hoped that would be true by the end of the evening. The expression on the guard's face seemed almost like pity. She turned her back on him and walked past the doors, behind some more curtains, and onto the corner of the stage. She sat there, dangling her feet over the edge, and stared into the empty rows of seats.

14.

THE STAGE was quiet, empty. So was the hall. Martin lay across the catwalk, clutching the metal platform with his hands, feeling the cool slats against his chest. So far, nothing. Nothing since he had seen that shadow rise out of the piano.

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If he slitted his eyes, he could still see it, hovering there, but he was beginning to realize that it was his imagination. He blamed himself for Terry's death. But as the killings continued, after each major solo performance in Rockridge, Martin felt the blame grow heavier within himself. He had set up the first concert with Rubinstein. He had laid the groundwork for the other appearances. He had given the Dixon its start.

And, as he had watched over the years, he noted that it was only when the piano was used for classical music that the killings happened. The local jazz performances brought no demons to the Dixon's stage. Neither did the high school's end-of-the-year musical. Even the orchestras, the famous, well-known orchestras, left the Dixon unscathed. Only the soloists provoked the Phantom — and only the famous soloists at that.

Martin watched Danny cross the stage. Danny was good at his profession, good enough to be working in Portland instead of Rockridge, but the man himself was strange. If Martin hadn't been with Danny the night Rowena was stabbed, he would have blamed the piano tuner. After all, Danny had been at all three concerts, fiddling with the piano. Danny never attended any of the other events. And for some reason, after all three performances, he had been angry, so angry that Martin was almost afraid of him.

Danny was angry now; Martin could see it in the way the tuner moved, the short, choppy bursts of motion followed by long steps. He approached the piano, played octave C's, and when the dissonance echoed throughout the theater, he slapped the open frame with the palm of his hand. A slight reverberation of wires, almost a humming, drifted up to Martin. Then, as he watched, the ghost creature, the shade beside the piano, touched Danny's neck with its knife.

Danny yelped and whirled. The creature filtered into Danny's open mouth, and suddenly his posture altered. He stood straighter, seemed more powerful. His right hand was arched as if it held an imaginary knife. He played several clear notes on the piano, striking each with his left hand, and as the succession of out-of-tune notes grew, so did the object Danny was holding. By the time he was done, the knife was solid and silver, gleaming against the darkness of the stage.

Martin got up and hurried along the catwalk. He had to do something — before Danny did.

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15.

CHRISSY DRUMMED her heels against the edge of the stage. What the hell was taking him so long? And why didn't he take her along? She would have liked to meet a famous violinist, even if his music had been boring.

Someone yelped. She turned quickly, her heart pounding. The piano tuner was standing beside the instrument, playing notes at random. She took a deep breath. All that talk at school about the Phantom made her more nervous than she cared to admit.

A hand touched her shoulder. She jumped, trying not to scream. The good-looking guy, the one who had let them in the back, had crouched down beside her. "This is not a safe place to be," he said. "Where's Mr. Ashly?"

"Talking to that violinist." She couldn't quite keep the resentment out of her voice.

"And he didn't let you go along?"

She shook her head. Suddenly she felt tears in the back of her eyes. Robert treated her so mean sometimes.

"Let me tell you something," the guy said. His blue eyes were fringed with long black lashes, the kind girls would kill for. "You may not like this, but maybe you'll remember it —"

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Jon."

"I'll remember, Jon."

He took a deep breath and drew his lips back so that they almost made a straight line. "Mr. Ashly was forced to sell the theater several years back. Do you know why?"

She shook her head. She hadn't even realized, until Robert had told the security guard, that he had owned the theater the first time he had lived in Rockridge.

"They kicked him out of town. Said he raped some girl. *Statutory* rape — she was too young."

"I'm eighteen," Chrissy whispered.

"I know, or he wouldn't have even brought you here. But you know what you are, don't you? You're his way of spitting at the community."

"I am not!" she slid away from him, as if putting more physical distance

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between them would make his words go away.

"Honey, I'm sorry —"

"No, you're not. You just said that to upset me. Well, you upset me. Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I —"

"Go away."

He stood up. "I am sorry. Honest I am. Just be careful."

She turned her back on him and brought her knees up to her chest, not caring if some pervert was hiding in those empty seats out there and saw that she wore nothing under her black skirt. Robert wasn't using her. Robert loved her. She could tell. Robert —

The scream made her turn. It was long, frightened, and male — and it ended abruptly, even as Chrissy saw what was happening. The piano tuner had grabbed Jon and shoved a knife in his back. Jon had fallen forward across the piano, and he wasn't moving.

Chrissy scrambled to her feet. The sound of her heels scuffling against the wood made the piano tuner turn. His eyes looked wrong, glittery. He grabbed the hilt of the knife and pulled it out of Jon's back. The knife glittered, too, although something told Chrissy that the knife should have seemed dull; it should have been dripping blood.

She looked for an opening on the stage, a way to return to Robert or that security guard, to go anywhere away from that man with the knife. And then, suddenly, in two steps, he was across the stage and grabbing her, raising the knife. She kicked back at him, hard, with her sister's heels, and her leg shuddered as the heel connected. He squealed, and the knife swung past her. She could hear the sound of a woman screaming, long, hollow, almost inhuman screams that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere in the theater. Someone had seen; someone would save her. Chrissy bit her lower lip and tried to wrench free of the man's grip. But he was strong, and it seemed like everywhere she turned, there was a knife, silver, glistening in the light that graced the stage. She tried kicking again, and missed. He brought the knife down, and in the last second, she moved. The blade grazed her arm, ripped her satin (her satin!), and chunked heavily into the skin along her stomach. She let out an *oof* of pain, and clutched at the knife, but he had already pulled it free.

Suddenly the man released her. Another man had grabbed him from the back, a man she hadn't seen before, and the two were struggling like

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men in a movie, only this was real. Chrissy drew in air to scream, and then decided that screaming was dumb. Someone else was screaming still, that long, hollow sound, and she looked up and saw that it was the woman in the booth, the glass booth toward the back of the theater. Her hands were splayed against the glass, and her mouth was open, and she was screaming.

Jon still lay across the piano, his blood dripping down his back and falling in a puddle beside his feet.

Chrissy had to find Robert or a security guard. She had to leave. She turned and fled into the darkness that was backstage, not realizing that the stickiness she felt was blood flowing from her side onto her black satin skirt.

16.

HE FELT like he was drowning, trapped inside all of that anger, violence, and fear. Danny had lost control of his own body. He had been invaded, violated, and held hostage inside of himself. He remembered holding the girl, feeling the sharpness of her heel against his shin, smelling the sharp scent of her fear — and yet, he knew that he wasn't doing anything to her at all. He had been reduced to a tiny being inside of himself, cringing against a much stronger force.

His body was fighting Martin now, holding him, stabbing at him with the knife. Danny's arm shook as the knife connected with Martin's shoulder, making a squishing sound as it pounded deep into his flesh. Martin moaned but did not scream, and Danny reached for him, tried to break through the wall that was keeping him prisoner, to warn Martin to get away.

Danny could do nothing. He tried to yell, but his mouth wouldn't open. The wall seemed to shudder with laughter, seemed to crave *(blood, more blood — the music had drained it)* something that it needed Danny's body to get.

He began exploring the wall, trying to find any chinks that would let him through, help him back into his own body, set himself free.

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17.

THE GIRL ran. Rowena stopped screaming, let air out of her throat, and sighed. Thank God. The girl was safe. Suddenly the scene before her became clear. The girl was safe, but Martin was fighting for his life against Danny.

(Danny! But he was the one who found her. He had been out drinking the night before, depressed because the piano wouldn't tune.)

She had to do something. The security guards would have heard the noise, but they might not make it in time to do anything. Danny seemed to have more strength than she thought him capable of. He was whipping that other man around, in a stabbing frenzy, bringong the knife down again and again. They whirled closer to the piano, to *(Jon. Holy Mother of God, that was Jon!)* the pool of blood on the floor. They knocked the music stand aside, and its clatter filled the tiny booth. And suddenly Rowena knew what she had to do.

She flipped around to the Neotek and began pushing up buttons. And then she punched it on, amplifying the sound in the auditorium. Feedback squealed from all the speakers. She kept bringing the sound up, making the feedback worse, until her ears felt as if they would burst. Shivers ran down her back, and her skin almost cringed, like it did when someone ran fingernails down a blackboard. The feedback might not stop the men, but it might help.

Rowena turned back to the glass, saw them down there. They had separated. Danny was on his knees, his hands covering his ears. The knife dangled beside his face like an obscene earring, although from her distance, it seemed to be losing definition. A security guard ran toward him, and then another, and another, all three wincing as the feedback attacked their ears. Two grabbed Danny and yanked him to his feet. And then, suddenly, the knife disappeared. Danny opened his mouth — to scream, perhaps — and something gray and not quite solid floated from him to the piano. He slumped forward, and the guards had to hold him to keep him from falling over.

She slammed her fist on the Neotek, stopping the feedback. Her ears rang, but she felt strangely and amazingly elated, as if she had just run a three-mile race and won.

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18.

MARTIN SAW it before the guards did. Danny was dead. Flat-ass, stone-cold dead. Martin got up slowly, clutching his shoulder. Blood oozed between his finger, but he felt all right. He supposed he wouldn't when the shock wore off. He was starting to breathe a little more clearly, his mind turning over the events. Rowena had nearly killed the thing. The feedback ate at it, nearly swallowed it whole, the strange, almost antimusic sound had nearly destroyed it. And leaving when it did had killed Danny.

Outside, sirens echoed. Someone had had the presence of mind to call the cops. Martin supposed he would have to make a statement. He surveyed the scene, looking with sadness upon the techie who died before he could get down there. He would use that man's blood as an excuse to destroy the piano, no matter what Wellman said. The piano had to go, be burned, something. It was the connection between it and the music, the well-played classical music, that had caused all the trouble at the Dixon.

The teenage girl that Danny had attacked stood in the wings. Her boyfriend (Robert Ashly. Dear God. Robert Ashly after little girls again) had put his suit coat around her shoulder and was clutching her tightly.

Martin watched as the police streamed in. They would start asking questions. He wanted to think, not about what he would tell them, but about the horrible suspicion that was growing in his mind.

If the piano possessed people and caused them to kill, who had killed Terry? Martin hadn't. He knew that. He remembered picking up programs, hearing Terry's grunt of pain.

And who had stabbed Rowena? Danny hadn't. He and Martin had gone out drinking that night. They left the theater together, Danny because he wanted to get away from that goddamn piano, and Martin because, because he hated the Dixon sometimes, on nights of successful concerts when he remembered that he no longer owned her.

And what had happened during the last concert, the Rampal concert, the night that other girl got killed? Martin didn't know, or if he did, he couldn't remember. He had been in the theater, but he couldn't remember anything except waking up the next morning with blood beneath his fingernails.

He sat on the edge of the stage and waited for the cops, wondering if he had the guts to tell them the truth, and knowing that he did not.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

A CHANGE OF AIR

A COUPLE OF weeks ago, as I write this, I was at M.I.T., where six people were receiving awards. Each of the six was being introduced by someone else equally important. The group of twelve included three Nobel laureates, of whom the most distinguished was, perhaps, Linus Pauling, a two-time Nobel laureate (Chemistry and Peace) who was 87 years old. He had come to introduce his old teacher, Herman F. Mark, who was 94, and who was one of those receiving an award. It was such a pleasure to see the two elderly fellows beaming at each other. I tried to imagine the feelings of Herman Mark at being introduced by the kid after all those years.

I was one of the six receiving an award, by the way, and gave the feature speech the next night. I didn't feel that I was in a class with the other awardees, but I upheld the honor of science fiction and accepted the quite beautiful award they were handing out.

Before the award ceremonies we had had dinner at the Boston Museum of Science, and from there we were taken to an M.I.T. auditorium by a fleet of limousines. It was a dark and drizzly night, and it was Boston/Cambridge, an area specifically designed for confusion.

So, as was inevitable, our limousine got lost. It tried both sides of the Charles River and made several forays up Massachusetts Avenue. All seemed hopeless. My dear wife, Janet, who has a touching faith in people, pointed out the car window and said, "Ask that man."

We did just that, over my protest that no bystander was ever helpful in such matters. Nor was he, even though he was clearly an M.I.T. student. We proceeded to ask about seventy-two others. Not one knew where the auditorium was. Most, in fact, seemed to be baffled by the fact that we were speaking English.

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Eventually, we encountered a policeman who used his walky-talky and, in the fullness of time, a police car came, collected us, and took us to the right place. We arrived twenty minutes late, and Janet's cheerful suggestion that we enter the hall handcuffed, to make a more striking impression as we arrived, was not taken up.

But you know, it is easy to get lost in science, too, especially if you start off on the wrong track.

In 1798, for instance, the French astronomer and mathematician Pierre Simon de Laplace advanced the "nebular hypothesis." He suggested that the Solar system originated from a huge cloud of dust and gas (a nebula), which was slowly spinning and condensing under its own gravitational pull. As it condensed, its rotation speeded up by the law of conservation of angular momentum.

Eventually, the rotation became fast enough for an equatorial bulge to detach itself and eventually condense into a planet. Later, another bulge did the same, and still later another one, and so on.

This hypothesis was a shrewd one, though inadequate in detail, and was immensely popular through the 1800's. It gave rise to the notion that the farther out from the Sun a planet was, the older it was. In particular, it made it seem that Mars must be millions of years older than Earth, which was, in turn, millions of years older than Venus.

That made it easy to believe that Mars was a world with a race of intelligent beings far beyond us in brainpower and ability, since they had had a so much longer time to evolve. Venus, on the other hand, was thought to be a young world still back in the equivalent of the Mesozoic era. It was a world of swamps and jungles and dinosaurs and other forms of dramatic life of the past.

Observations of Mars and Venus seemed to back up this view. Mars had ice caps, so it must have water, but from its ruddy color one would naturally suspect that it was mostly desert. Considering its small size and weak gravity, it might have lost much of its water over the eons. For that reason, when the notion of canals arose in 1877, it became easy to imagine a race of super-intellects fighting to bring water from the icecaps down to the martian desert and to plan the invasion and takeover of well watered Earth.

Venus, on the other hand, had a thick and permanent cloud layer that seemed to indicate that it must be a very watery world. Some people even thought it might be covered by a planetary ocean with no land

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at all. That was, in fact, the picture I drew of Venus in my novel *Lucky Starr and the Oceans of Venus* (Doubleday, 1954).

By that time, Laplace's original notion had been dismissed long before as totally inadequate. A much more subtle and useful version of the nebular hypothesis had been advanced in 1944 by the German astronomer Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker, and in that one all the planets were formed at about the same time. Mars, Earth, and Venus, we are now quite sure, are all equally old, and there is no longer any reason to think of an ancient Mars and a youthful Venus.

But science fiction writers continued to do so. Old habits are hard to break and, besides, an advanced and malignant race of Martians and a primitive and dinosaur ridden Venus were too dramatic to abandon.

This was encouraged by the fact that even in the mid-1950's, we were almost entirely ignorant of the details of planetary characteristics. In the March, 1957, issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, I had an essay entitled "Planets Have an Air About them," in which I said a great many perfectly accurate things about gases and planetary gravitations and types of atmosphere, but was careful not to say a single word about Venus, concerning whose atmosphere we still knew nothing.

A year after the essay, however, everything changed, and here's how it happened.

All objects except those at absolute zero (and there are no objects at absolute zero) give off electromagnetic radiation, if surrounded by an environment at a lower temperature than itself. The higher the temperature, the shorter the wavelength of this radiation. By the time a temperature of about 600 C. is reached, some of the emitted radiation is short enough in wavelength to be red light, and the object is then said to be "red-hot."

If the temperature continues to rise, shorter and shorter wavelengths of light appear. The object grows orange-hot, yellow-hot, white-hot, blue-white-hot. If it were hot enough, most of its radiation would appear as invisible ultra-violet.

By the distribution of wavelengths in sunlight, and by the nature of the dark lines, which tell us to what extent different atoms may be ionized, we can tell just how hot the Sun's surface is. We can also tell the surface temperature of any star whose spectrum we can study.

But what about objects that are not quite hot enough to give off appreciable light? In that case, they give off infra-red radiation, which has wavelengths longer than that

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of red light. Infra-red does not affect our retinas, so that we can't see it, but it is absorbed by our skin and our heat sensitive nerves can detect it. Thus, if you place your hand near a hot vessel on the stove, you can feel the warmth before you touch it.

If an object cools down still further, it radiates longer and longer wavelengths, until you can't sense them in any way, but the radiation is still there. Beyond the infra-red are the still longer wavelengths of microwaves, which are given off copiously by objects that are quite cool to the touch. If we could detect microwaves from a far-away object, then, we could tell from their quantity and wavelength range how hot that object might be.

After World War II (thanks to the development of radar technology, which makes use of microwaves), astronomers could build large "radio telescopes" capable of detecting and concentrating small quantities of microwave radiation, just as ordinary telescopes detect and concentrate small quantities of light.

In 1958, a group of American astronomers under Cornell H. Mayer made use of a radio telescope that was sufficiently delicate to detect microwave radiation given off by the dark side of Venus.

How much radiation were they expecting?

That depended in part on how quickly Venus rotated, but no one, in 1958, knew anything about Venus's rotation period. One could not see features in the clouds that could be followed as they moved about the planet, and the solid surface beneath the clouds was utterly invisible.

Some astronomers thought that Venus kept one side permanently to the Sun. If that were so, then the dark side would be in permanent darkness, and it would be, at best, quite cold. To be sure, wind from the sunlit side would carry some warmth into the dark side, but perhaps not much (witness Antarctica on Earth during its months of winter). As a result, the microwave radiation from the dark side, at least, might be very small.

On the other hand, some astronomers thought that Venus might have a rotation period near the 24 hour mark, as Earth and Mars did. in that case, the microwave emission might indicate a roughly Earth-like temperature, since the fact that Venus was closer to the Sun might be balanced by the fact that its cloud layer reflected most of the sunlight it received.

Well, Mayer did detect the microwave radiation from Venus, and he did not get either expected alternative. He did not get a very low temperature of a dark side that

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never saw the Sun, nor did he get an Earth-like temperature, nor, for that matter, anything between.

Instead, he got a flood of microwave radiation that indicated a temperature of at least 300 C., some two hundred degrees above the boiling point of water. It was a thunderbolt. No one had expected such a hot Venus.

But *why* should Venus be so hot? Surely the cloud layer should have cooled it off. Besides, Mercury is closer to the Sun than Venus is and has no clouds to reflect light, or any atmosphere at all, and Venus seems to be hotter than Mercury!

Perhaps, then, Venus's atmosphere, instead of tending to cool the planet by its insulating clouds, actually acts to *warm* the planet.

After all, solar radiation reaches a planetary surface in the form of wavelengths short enough to constitute light. This is absorbed by the planet and the surface is warmed. At night, the warmed surface radiates into the emptiness of space, but the planet, unlike the Sun, is not hot enough to radiate light. It radiates infra-red.

Oxygen, nitrogen, and argon, which make up almost all of Earth's atmosphere, are transparent to both light and infra-red. As far as they are concerned, light passes through to Earth's surface by day, and infra-red leaves Earth's surface by night, with no interference in either case, and a certain equilibrium temperature is maintained.

Carbon dioxide and water vapor, however, are transparent to light but not entirely to infra-red. This means that while light has no trouble reaching Earth's surface by day, the infra-red radiated by the surface at night is somewhat blocked. The average temperature therefore rises a bit. It is the small quantity of carbon dioxide and water vapor in Earth's temperature that makes Earth's temperature milder and, on the whole, more suitable for life.

This is called the "greenhouse effect," because it has often been compared with a greenhouse, in which the glass allows light to enter, but prevents infra-red from emerging so that the temperature inside the greenhouse is warm even in the winter. (Actually, many people point out that this is not because the glass blocks infra-red, but because it keeps the warmed air itself from escaping, so that it prevents convection rather than radiation. However, there is no hope of changing the phrase.)

Suppose, then, that Venus does not have the kind of atmosphere we thought. As long as we had the notion of a Mesozoic Venus fixed in our minds, we had to assume an

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atmosphere that was basically like the Earth's. But suppose that was not so.

Suppose that Venus had a different atmosphere — a change of air. Suppose Venus's atmosphere was rich in carbon dioxide as well as in water vapor. There might have been enough greenhouse effect to raise the temperature of its ocean appreciably higher so that still more water vapor moved into the air. The greenhouse effect would be heightened and the temperature would go up still further, so that carbon dioxide would bake out of limestone, and the temperature would rise still higher. Eventually, the oceans would boil until, finally, Venus would be extremely hot and utterly, completely dry. It would be the result of a "runaway greenhouse effect."

This point of view was vigorously supported by, among others, Carl Sagan and James Pollack.

There were some astronomers, however, who could not let go the picture of a watery Venus. They argued that the rich emission of microwaves might not be the result of surface heat at all, but was merely the effect of electrical phenomena in the upper atmosphere of Venus. It had recently been discovered that Jupiter had a powerful magnetic field and produced microwave radiation that was *not* the result of surface heat. Why not Venus as well?

Was there anything about the microwave radiation that could be made to distinguish between these two possibilities?

For one thing the microwave radiation was particularly high in the higher wavelengths of 3 centimeters and more. It dropped rapidly at wavelengths under 3 centimeters. Why?

Sagan's explanation was this. If the microwaves originated as a result of Venus's possession of a very hot surface, those microwaves would have to pass through Venus's atmosphere in order to get into space and travel to Earth's detecting instruments. Venus's atmosphere might absorb the short wavelength microwaves and let the long wavelength microwaves pass through.

If, on the other hand, the microwaves originated high in the atmosphere, they would move into space without passing through significant amounts of matter, so some reason other than atmospheric absorption would have to be found to account for the fall off at short wavelengths. no good reason suggested itself.

Of course, if astronomers went with the atmospheric absorption suggestion, that created some difficulty. To do all that absorbing, Venus's atmosphere would have to be about a hundred times as dense as Earth's was. But that might prove to be so.

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An even better way of distinguishing between the two views existed. Consider the microwaves emerging from the center of Venus's disc. They would travel straight up through the atmosphere to reach space and speed on their way to Earth. Imagine, however, microwaves released near the edge, or "limb," of Venus's disc. To reach Earth they would have to pass through the atmosphere at a slant and, therefore, through a much thicker layer of gas. There would be more absorption, so that fewer microwaves would get through.

As a result, the amount of microwaves absorbed would increase steadily as one travelled from the center of Venus's disc toward the limb in any direction. There would therefore be less microwave emission and this is called "radio limb-darkening." (There is a limb-darkening effect on the Sun because its own atmosphere absorbs some of the light it emits, so that this is a well known phenomenon.)

But suppose the microwaves originated in Venus's upper atmosphere, in the planet's ionosphere, if it had one. There would be no absorption to speak of, either from the center or from the limbs, because there would be little in the way of gases above the ionosphere. However, as seen from Earth, the ionosphere would be thicker at the limbs than at the center, because at the limbs, it would be seen at a slant. As a result, we would detect somewhat *more* radio waves from the limb than from the center. There would be an example of "radio limb-brightening."

In short, if the limb were dimmer than the center, it would mean a hot surface; if it were brighter, it would mean a hot ionosphere and a possibly cool surface. From Earth, however, Venus was so nearly a mere dot of light that astronomers couldn't tell what microwaves came from the center and what from the limb. (Nowadays, a quarter-century later, we have instruments advanced enough to do the job.)

But on August 27, 1962, the United States launched a Venus-probe, *Mariner 2*, designed to pass near Venus and to make a variety of measurements. On December 14, 1962, *Mariner 2* skimmed by Venus, making its closest approach at 34,831 kilometers (21,648 miles) above the cloud layer. At that distance, Venus's disc was something like 35 times as wide as that of the Moon seen from Earth.

Mariner 2 measured the intensity of microwaves at a wavelength of 1.9 centimeters across the disc of Venus. The results were unmistakable. There was radio limb-darkening. That was strong support for the suggestion that Venus's

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surface was very hot.

In addition, *Mariner 2* detected no magnetic field at all. Since a magnetic field was more or less necessary for ionospheric microwave activity, that further weakened the suggestion that microwave radiation was a phenomenon of Venus's upper atmosphere.

Finally, *Mariner 2* made more accurate determinations of the intensity of microwave radiation from Venus than could be done from Earth, and it turned out that Venus was even hotter than had been thought. The surface was not at 300C, but at 400 C.

Later on, further, more sophisticated probes passed by Venus, and the Soviet Union, in a series of attempts, actually dropped entry capsules into Venus's atmosphere.

By the end of the 1960's, it was clear that Venus's temperature was not 400 C., but more like 480 C. In addition, the atmosphere was indeed as thick as the microwave-absorption suggestion had indicated. It was about 100 times as dense as Earth's atmosphere. Furthermore, in line with the notion of the runaway greenhouse effect, the atmosphere was about 95 percent carbon dioxide while the rest was nitrogen.

(Considering the density of Venus's atmosphere, the total quantity of nitrogen it contains is perhaps five times that contained in Earth's atmosphere, but the quantity of carbon dioxide overwhelms it and makes it a minor constituent, in comparison.)

All this is horrible enough, but what about Venus's clouds? Ever since it had been recognized that the cloud layer existed, it had been assumed that those clouds consisted of water, as they do on Earth. It might still be so on Venus, as the developing heat of the runaway greenhouse effect forced all the surface water into the upper atmosphere as permanent clouds and, beyond that, into space.

Beginning in 1973, however, astronomers began to suggest that spectroscopic data made it seem that the clouds of Venus were not exactly pure water, but were, instead, a rather concentrated solution of sulfuric acid. In the late 1970's, Soviet probes reaching into Venus's atmosphere supported this conclusion and showed that there was more sulfur dioxide in Venus's atmosphere than there was water vapor. The sulfur dioxide adds to the greenhouse effect.

So there we have it. Venus has enormous gas pressures, enormous temperatures, a totally unbreathable atmosphere, and clouds of sulfuric acid on high. Sagan commented that Venus was very close to what people had imagined

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Hell to be like.

In one respect, Venus proved a little better than some had thought. The thick clouds might, after all, block so much light that Venus's surface would be shrouded in eternal night. In fact, when the Soviets first sent objects down to Venus's surface, they included floodlights to make it possible to take photographs.

However, about 2 1/2 percent of the sunlight falling on Venus penetrates the clouds and reaches Venus's surface, making it possible to take photographs without artificial aid. In fact, since the sunlight reaching Venus is twice as intense as that reaching us, it means that Venus is lit 1/20 as brightly as Earth is on a sunny day. That's over a billion times as bright as the full Moon, so at least Venus is a lighted Hell and not a shrouded one.

Here's something else. Why doesn't Venus have a magnetic field?

Earth has a diameter of 12,756 kilometers (7,926 miles), while Venus has a diameter of 12,140 kilometers (7,543 miles). Earth has an overall density of 5.5 times that of water, while Venus has one of 5.2 times that of water.

The similarity in size and density makes it seem certain tht if Earth has a liquid iron core (as seems to be the case) then Venus must have one, too. (Of the other three terrestrial bodies, by the way, the density of Mercury is 5.4; that of Mars is 4.0; and that of the Moon is 3.3. It follows that Mercury should also have a liquid iron core, while Mars and the Moon do not.)

The current feeling is that Earth has a magnetic field because swirls are set up in the electricity conducting liquid iron core as a result of the planet's relatively rapid rotation. It follows that the Moon and Mars, without a liquid iron core, should not have a magnetic field, and probes have shown that indeed they do not.

Mercury has a liquid iron core, but its period of rotation is long — 1,407 hours, compared to Earth's 24. Apparently, this is enough, however, to allow a very weak magnetic field to be developed.

That leaves Venus. Whether Venus has a magnetic field as strong as Earth's — or stronger, or weaker — depends on its period of rotation; and, as I said earlier in the essay, until the 1960's no one had any notion as to how quickly it rotated.

Guesses had been anywhere between 24 hours and, if it rotated on its axis in the time it took it to revolve about the Sun, 5,400 hours.

But suppose a microwave beam is sent to Venus. It would pass through the cloud layer as though it were not there and it would be

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reflected by Venus's solid surface. If the surface of Venus is motionless, the incoming beam would be unaffected; the reflected beam would return with the same wavelength it had left with. If, however, the surface of Venus were moving, as it would have to do if it rotated on its axis, the wavelength of the beam would be altered a bit and this alteration would be detected in the reflected beam. The greater the speed of movement of the planetary surface, the greater the change in wavelength.

On May 10, 1961, a microwave beam was sent out to Venus, and the results were absolutely astonishing. They were announced in 1962 by Roland L. Carpenter and Richard M. Goldstein, even as *Mariner 2* was on its way to Venus.

Venus was rotating on its axis *even more slowly* than it revolved about the Sun. It is unique in the Solar system in this respect, as far as we know.

Venus rotates on its axis in 243 Earth days, or 5,832 hours. We can compare it to other worlds if we put it in terms of the speed of motion of a point on the planetary equator as the planet rotates.

A point on Earth's equator moves at 1,037 miles per hour. A point on Mercury's equator moves at 6.7 miles per hour. A point on Venus's equator moves at 4.0 miles per hour. To put it dramatically, Earth is moving like a jet plane; Mercury is moving at a run; and Venus is moving at a walk.

If Mercury only has a very small magnetic field, it wouldn't be at all surprising if the still slower Venus would have so small a tendency to set up swirls in its liquid iron core that its magnetic field would be indetectable.

And, as I said, when *Mariner 2* reached Venus, it could detect no magnetic field, and this in itself served to support the observation that Venus rotated on its axis very slowly.

In parting, let me mention that, just to make Venus even more peculiar, the planet is rotating at this slow rate in the "wrong" direction. Instead of turning west to east as the Sun, Mercury, Earth, Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Neptune do, it turns east to west.

Why this is so, we simply don't know — but then we don't want to solve everything, do we? After having learned so much about Venus in the last thirty years (we have even mapped its surface by beams of microwaves), surely we want to leave something to keep future astronomers busy and happy.

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John Morressy returns with a new adventure of Kedrigern the wizard, in which his lovely wife Princess is asked to perform an emergency despelling. Princess, you may recall, was once a toad herself and so has some experience in these things . . .

Cricket on the Hearth

By John Morressy

IT WAS NOT even remotely fair. Kedrigern, who loathed travel as deeply and passionately as he despised alchemy, was off traveling on this glorious summer day, while Princess, who looked upon travel as one of life's great joys, was confined at home. He was on his way through cool forest and fragrant meadow to the manor of a generous and hospitable client; she was in the cottage on Silent Thunder Mountain, with only Spot for company.

True, the summons had been a bona fide emergency. True, someone had to remain at home to receive Eda of the Golden Fingers (whoever or whatever he, she, or it was, and wanted), and this duty could not be entrusted to Spot. And true, too, that only Kedrigern could perform the particular despelling called for in the summons. But all the same, it was not fair. Lovely days of travel were being flung away on Kedrigern, who at this very moment was probably eating lunch under a shady oak, listening to birdsong, and wishing that he were at home, hunched over his work-

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table, mastering an intricate counterspell. And here sat Princess, idling away the days, waiting for Eda. Not fair at all.

She dawdled over a light lunch, then took a book into the garden, intending to read until suppertime. The book was a bore. She decided to go to the far end of the meadow and see how the haemony was coming along.

The transplants were doing quite well, by all appearances. A few had put forth small golden flowers, and that was an encouraging sign: flowering haemony is powerful haemony, an herb of sovereign use against enchantment and mildew, and a great restorative for wizards low on magic. Kedrigern had been fortunate to locate a corner of the meadow where faint residual magic lingered in the soil (haemony required enchanted soil and frequent watering), and that seemed to have made all the difference.

One day, Princess reflected, this very haemony might save some poor enchantee — probably a beautiful princess — from a foul and completely undeserved spell. Why are people putting cruel and nasty spells on beautiful princesses? Princess wondered. Now, *there* was unfairness for you. Princesses never hurt anyone, spent all their time being lovely and desirable, inspired young men to deeds of courage and general usefulness, and yet there was always some evil old witch or wizard or sorcerer, a withered crone or a touchy fairy itching to turn them into toads or geese, or put them to sleep for ridiculously long periods of time, or whisk them off to someplace gloomy. "Why can't people leave us alone?" she said aloud, angrily, in the empty meadow.

There was no immediate answer, but in a very short time there was a response. Spot came bounding across the meadow toward her, its ears flapping and huge hands waving as it disappeared into the high grass at the end of each long leap, and reappeared crying, "Yah! Yah!" excitedly.

When Spot thumped to a stop beside her, embedding itself knee-deep in the soft soil, she stopped and asked, "What is it, Spot?"

"Yah, yah!" it exclaimed, gesturing toward the road as it tugged its oversized feet free.

"I see. And are they close?"

"Yah."

"Very well. You go to the house, very quietly, and stay out of sight," she instructed the little house-troll.

"Yah?"

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"I'll look them over. Don't worry, Spot. I know a spell or two. We'll be perfectly safe."

As Spot vanished into the tall grass, Princess flexed her gauzy wings and lifted off, flying close to the ground until she was in the shelter of the great twin oaks that overspread the arbor to the west of the cottage. Rising and hovering near the upper branches, she softly called, "Gylorel. Anlorel. Can you hear me?"

Lights shimmered at the crown of the larger oak, and a sweet voice like the sound of chimes in the circumambient air said, "Is that you, Princess? Is anything wrong? Gylorel's asleep. It was windy last night, and he's exhausted."

"I understand. I could hear his branches whipping back and forth all night. He must ache clear down to his roots," Princess said sympathetically.

"He'll be all right as long as the wind doesn't pick up for the next few days," Anlorel assured her.

"It must have been trying for you, too."

"We dryads are always worrying about our tree. If Gylorel ever blew down, or split. . . ."

"Don't think about such things, dear. Gylorel's a fine, strong oak with centuries of productive life ahead. You'll have a little forest of your own before you know it."

"I suppose I'm overprotective sometimes. But Princess, what do you want to see us about?"

"Spot saw horsemen approaching, and I was hoping you could find out something about them. I could fly over them myself, but, since I'm home alone, I think it wise to take precautions," said Princess.

"Very sensible. I'll be happy to take a look at them."

"Do you mind if I wait down below?"

"Of course not. I'll be right back," said the dryad in her sweet, melodious voice.

Princess touched down in the shadow of the oaks and seated herself to await Anlorel's report. The dryad swept down moments later, in a shower of tiny sparking points of light, and said, "It's a very impressive company, Princess: six big horsemen, two wagons, and a beautiful white horse with a little house on the saddle."

"Do they look friendly?" Princess asked anxiously.

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"They don't appear unfriendly. 'Worried' is the word I would use to describe them. Or 'concerned.'"

"Then maybe this is Eda of the Golden Fingers and his men. Or her men."

"I didn't see any women."

"Did you see anyone with golden fingers?"

"They all wore gloves. Sorry."

Princess nodded thoughtfully. "Eda was supposed to arrive sometime this month. That's why I stayed home. It's an emergency of some sort. The message was vague."

"Well, they aren't racing here at breakneck speed, but they're very dusty, and the poor horses look absolutely done in. It may well be Eda and his men."

"Nothing for it but to go and greet them and find out. Thank you, Anlorel."

"My pleasure. If you should need help, don't hesitate to call on us."

Anlorel swept off and up in a swirl of light. Princess rose, dusted off her robe, straightened the plain golden circlet on her brows, and folded her wings against her shoulders and back. She walked to the dooryard gate and stood awaiting her visitors.

The main party halted at the edge of the trees, by a clearing on the opposite side of the road. A large man, very dusty, on a dusty black horse, rode to the house, leading a magnificent but dusty white mare with a dusty, boxlike construction on the saddle. The man dismounted, bowed gracefully, and in a weary, husky voice asked, "Good lady, is this the home of Kedrigern the wizard?"

"It is indeed. And are you Eda of the Golden Fingers?"

"I am Red Thorm, Prince of Umberdure, betrothed to the fair Eda."

"I see. Welcome, then, Red Thorm. Will the fair Eda be joining us?"

"She is already with us, my lady," said Red Thorm, glancing significantly at the box on the saddle. Observing it more closely, Princess saw that under the dust was a miniature manor house of charming delicacy. She looked at it for a moment, then turned to Red Thorm, and he returned her look of inquiry with a solemn nod.

"The fair Eda is rather small," said Princess.

"She is under a wicked spell from which only the good Kedrigern, master of counterspells, can free her," Red Thorm said in a voice hoarse

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with feeling. "Diminished stature is one of the effects of the spell. There are others."

"I can promise you with confidence that Kedrigern will do all in his power — which is considerable — to help unspell fair Eda. Unfortunately, there will be a slight delay in service. Kedrigern is not at home."

"Not . . . at home?" Red Thorm repeated, his expression anguished.

"An emergency summoned him away. He will return promptly. Meanwhile, you and Eda may stay in our cottage. I am Princess, wife of Kedrigern, chatelaine of this household, and myself a wizard of some standing. Your retainers may camp in the clearing."

"My lady is most gracious, and I hope will not think me presumptuous if I ask a few significant questions," said Red Thorm, regaining his composure.

"Ask away," said Princess.

"Do you keep pet birds?"

"No."

"Good. Do you have a dog, or a cat?"

"No, we do not."

"Good. Very good," said Red Thorm with evident relief. "And — forgive me, my lady Princess, but I must know — are you troubled with rats or mice?"

"A spell keeps small undesirable creatures at a distance, and our house-troll sees to larger intruders."

"Is it a big house-troll, my lady?"

"Small, and with better manners than some people. Is that all you wish to know?" Princess asked. Her voice was noticeably chilly.

"It is, my lady. I am reassured, and so is the fair Eda. In her present condition, she is very vulnerable, and every precaution must be taken. Surely you understand."

"The fair Eda will be safe in my house. You may bring her in. Spot will see to the horses," said Princess, gesturing to the doorway.

With a bath and a change of outfit, Red Thorm looked more like a noble and less like a clay effigy. Under all the dust of travel, he was a husky man, tall in stature, with auburn hair and a thick reddish gold beard. His sunburned features were rugged, and as he sat down to a light supper, they were marked with concern. The little house, which he

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kept by him at all times, was on the chair at his side.

"My lady is most hospitable, and her cuisine is excellent," he said when he had consumed the last morsel.

"Spot is a very decent cook."

"Will Master Kedrigern return soon?"

"He assured me that he would come home as quickly as possible," Princess said.

"To such a pleasant home, and so lovely a wife, what man would not hasten to return? But have you no idea when?"

"Nothing specific. You're really concerned for Eda, aren't you?"

"I am heartsick. Obsessed. Desperate," Red Thorm said in a hollow voice.

"It's not good to keep those feelings bottled up. Why don't you tell me all about it?"

"I . . . I cannot. It is too painful."

"Then perhaps Eda will come out and tell me her story."

Red Thorm's face showed even deeper concern, compounded with discomfort, anxiety, and indecision. He rubbed his forehead hard with one hand while he combed the other through his curly beard, all the while darting agonized glances at the little house beside him. At last, with difficulty, he said, "The fair Eda . . . is most sensitive . . . about her appearance."

"Is she disfigured? Hideous? What has the spell done to her?"

"She has been transformed into . . . into a . . . a base creature," Red Thorm said, forcing the words out.

Princess smiled a radiant smile that would have reassured a man on the gallows. "It might lift her spirits to know that I, too, have labored under an unpleasant spell."

"Indeed, my lady?"

"I was once a toad," Princess announced.

A moment of utter silence followed. Red Thorm's jaw dropped, and his eyes widened into perfect circles of astonishment. From within the box came a sudden scritching sound and a tiny cry of "You were? Then there is hope!"

"Of course there's hope, Eda dear. Kedrigern despelled me, and I'm sure he can do the same for you. Will you tell me your story?"

More scritching, then, "You shall hear it all!" the wee voice shouted

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boldly. "Red Thorm, open the house. We will reveal ourselves to this encouraging lady."

Noticing the use of the plural, Princess wondered at Eda's station; could she be a queen, to use the royal *we* so easily? But when Red Thorm placed the dainty house on the table, drew back the roof, and folded down the front, the reason for the plural was clear. Out of the diminutive manor house hopped a large cricket. At its side ran a fat gray spider.

"Are they both Eda? That's a very sophisticated spell!" Princess said with unconcealed admiration and a touch of envy.

"No, my lady, Eda is the cricket. Crickets cannot speak, so the spider serves as her interpreter," Red Thorm explained.

"But spiders can't speak, either," Princess objected.

"Maybe the others can't, but I can," snapped the spider, its tiny voice indignant.

"So you can. Sorry," Princess said.

"Now you know why we prefer to stay in the house. If people see an insect or a spider, all they want to do is squash it flat or flick it away. They never think of starting a conversation," the spider said peevishly.

"As you pointed out, other insects and spiders can't speak."

"Well, they don't get much chance to try, do they? Maybe if people said, Hello,' or, 'How are you today?' instead of stomping down a filthy boot or swinging a broom the instant they see one of us, we might —" The spider was halted in mid-tirade by a furious outburst of skreeking from the cricket. It paused, then went on in a subdued voice, "Anyway, I can speak, even though I *am* a spider, and Eda wants me to tell her story in her own words."

"Please do," said Princess.

The tale was told in installments. First the cricket emitted a burst of chirks and scrickles, then the spider passed their content on in brief narrative form. To Princess, Eda's seemed at first to have all the earmarks of a sad, familiar story.

"Eda wants you to know that you see before you one whose only crimes are her sweetness and beauty and amazing musical talent. Now, alas, her beauty is gone, her sweetness is sorely tried, and her musical talent is reduced to a monotonous, shrill scratching. Woe is she," said the spider blandly.

"You poor thing. Were you a princess?" asked Princess.

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"Not yet, but she was close," the spider continued after an interval of stridulation. "Her father was a knight-banneret, her mother a gentlewoman of the court of Umberdure. Eda was betrothed to Red Thorm, prince of the land."

At these words, Red Thorm covered his face with his hands and groaned loudly. Princess reached over to pat him on the head and softly say, "There, there. Don't be upset. Everything will work out." Returning her attention to the tiny pair, she said, "You must have been very beautiful, Eda."

Pausing in its reply until a fresh outburst of groans from Red Thorm had subsided, the spider went on, "She was ravishing. And besides her looks, she had talent. She could play a rebec like nothing you ever heard. That's what stirred up the bitter jealousy. You see, Eda's mother died while Eda was still very small, and her father soon remarried. Her stepmother was a beautiful woman with a talent for music. When she realized how great Eda's musical gifts were, and how much they exceeded her own—"

"She became insanely jealous and brought this horrid spell down on you!" Princess broke in.

"Nothing of the sort," said the spider smugly, after a wild outburst from the cricket.

"No? But I've always heard that stepmothers were wicked," Princess said.

"Well, Eda's wasn't. She was as kind and generous a woman as one could wish to meet. She devoted her life to Eda's musical training and saw to it that her beloved stepchild had everything a girl could wish. That's what caused the jealousy."

"Some rival for the love of your betrothed?" Princess asked hopefully.

Red Thorm gave a heartrending cry, flung up his hands in a desperate gesture, and howled, "No! It was the work of my fairy godmother!"

Princess looked from Thorm to cricket to spider, wide-eyed. In a small, uncertain voice, she said, "But fairy godmothers don't *do* things like that. . . ."

"Spiders don't talk, either, do they?" said the spider derisively. "If you don't mind my saying so, you ought to get off this mountain and find out what's going on in the world. You're out of touch."

"None of your snide remarks, spider," Red Thorm said hotly. "Stick to translating. That's your job."

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"Well, somebody has to face up to the facts," the spider grumbled.

"What facts? What do you know about fairy godmothers? Nemasteena was *my* fairy godmother," Red Thorm declared, his voice rising, "and she was jealous of my beloved Eda."

"Jealous? Do you mean that your own fairy godmother . . . had designs on you?" Princess asked, shocked by the very thought.

"No, no, no. She had plans for me, but no designs. Nemasteena made me brave; mighty of stature; handsome in a rugged, manly way; and wise beyond my years . . . but surely you've noticed all that."

"One could hardly miss it."

"Well, when I told her of my love for Eda, she flew into a rage. She said terrible things about us both. The thrust of her remarks was that she had not lavished gifts of mind and body on me in order to have me throw myself away on a common fiddler."

Princess's eyes flashed fire. "That's a disgraceful way for a fairy godmother to behave! It's outrageous!"

"My very words," said Red Thorm. "I rebuked her. We argued. Just when our argument was most heated, my beloved Eda entered the chamber. At the sight of her, Nemasteena let out a wild, wicked laugh and cast this spell on her. I pleaded with Nemasteena to retract it, but she was adamant. She finally agreed to enchant the spider, so my poor Eda would have a translator, but she would yield no further." At his last words, Red Thorm's lips trembled, and he buried his face in his hands and began to weep noisily and murmur, "Oh my Eda, my beloved! Oh lost, forever lost!"

"Don't abandon hope," Princess said.

"She's a cricket!" Red Thorm blubbered.

"She's under a spell. She can be despelled. Kedrigern will see to it as soon as he returns."

Red Thorm raised his head and looked at Princess in tearful, but rather calculating, appeal. "Must we wait? Can't *you* do something?"

"Well . . . I don't know. . . ."

"You said you were a wizard," the spider pointed out. "I'm just translating Eda, but I agree with her. If you're a wizard, do something wizardly."

"It's not that simple. Counterspelling is a highly specialized field. Kedrigern is the one who does counterspells. I'm more of a . . . a generalist," Princess said, looking uncomfortable.

"Oh, she's a generalist," sneered the spider. "We can all sit and wait,

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"I'm talking about a lot of danger. If I don't work exactly the right counterspell, she might—"

because *she's* a generalist. Well, pardon me, my lady."

"There's no need to be nasty," Princess said.

"I'm a spider. We're all nasty." After a short burst of scricks from the cricket, the spider added, "And it may interest you to know that sweet, charming Eda agrees with me."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that I agree with the spider, but I do think you could give it a try," Red Thorm said, sniffling and wiping his eyes and nose on his sleeve.

"It could be very dangerous," Princess warned him.

"Eda's a plucky girl. A little danger doesn't frighten my Eda," Red Thorm said boldly.

"I'm talking about a *lot* of danger. If I don't work exactly the right counterspell, she might—"

An urgent passage of chirks from the cricket interrupted Princess, and was followed by the spider's voice smugly announcing, "Eda doesn't want to hear about danger. *She* has courage enough to plunge ahead. She wants you to despell her — if you can."

"All right. All right," Princess said, doing her best to restrain her growing annoyance and remain the proper hostess and impartial wizard. "All right," she repeated, while she tried to recall the necessary procedures.

"That's some spell you've got there," the spider jeered. "Say 'all right' three times, and hope we'll all go away. Is that how your magic works?"

"Just be quiet, please, so I can concentrate. This is very tricky business," Princess said. Her voice was calm, but an undertone of strain was perceptible. "The first thing I have to know is the wording of the spell. Do any of you recall exactly what Nemasteena said to turn Eda into a cricket?"

Red Thorm stared at her blankly. So, presumably, did the two smaller guests, though in their case, it was difficult to be sure. At last, Red Thorm said peevishly, "What kind of question is that? We don't remember what Nemasteena said. How could anyone expect us to?"

"Well, if you want a quick despelling—"

"It was a very fraught moment," he went on angrily. "Extremely fraught. I was arguing loudly with Nemasteena, and was not fully in control of my

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feelings. Eda was taken completely by surprise. Under the circumstances, how can you expect either of us to remember the words of a spell?"

"And don't look at *me*," muttered the spider.

"I was never good at memorizing," said Red Thorm. "I'm a prince, not a storyteller. I don't memorize. I have people to do that sort of thing for me."

"Did any of them happen to be on hand at the time?" Princess asked with a forced calm.

"Of course not. Do you think I allow bards and minstrels and people of that class to loiter about when I'm arguing with my fairy godmother?"

A chirrup from the cricket prevented Princess's reply, and the spider said, "Eda wants to know what's wrong with bards and minstrels and people of that class."

"They're just not the right sort, that's all," said Red Thorm stiffly.

"Eda says they're *her* sort, and you know it, and she wonders why you don't come right out and say what you're hinting at," said the spider.

Drawing himself up, glaring at the spider, Red Thorm said, "Eda knows very well that I do not hold her status against her. She may be a mere rebec player in the eyes of Nemasteena and the rest of the world, but I am willing to overlook that and allow her to be my ladylove."

"Eda says, 'Thank you very much,'" the spider announced.

Red Thorm's eyes narrowed. "Are you being snide with me?"

"This is no time for quarreling," Princess said, standing and raising her hands to still the angry exchange. "We have a spell to undo. That kind of work calls for cooperation, not arguing."

"You keep out of this," said spider and Red Thorm as one.

"I will not keep out of this, or anything else that goes on within these walls! The nerve of you! This is my house, and if you don't behave yourselves, I'll send the lot of you packing — is that understood?" Princess said, eyes blazing and jaw firmly set.

After a silence followed by a single muted skreek, the spider muttered, "Eda says, 'He started it.'"

"I did not!" Red Thorm cried. "And she didn't say that, either; it was your own idea! You're putting words into Eda's mouth!"

"I am not! *She's* putting words into *mine!*" the spider retorted indignantly.

"That will be enough," said Princess, bringing her silver goblet down hard on the tabletop with a report that silenced the squabbling voices. "If

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this bickering does not cease at once, there will be no counterspells worked on Eda in this house. Not by me, not by Kedrigern, not by anyone, ever. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Red Thorm's nostrils flared, and his eyes became angry slits, but he kept his mouth clamped tightly shut. There was not a word from the spider nor a sound from the cricket.

"That's better," said Princess. "Now we can get to work. Apparently no one here remembers the wording of Nemasteena's spell. I have a question for Red Thorm. I want a simple, direct answer, and no comment from anyone else." She paused. The others remained silent, so she went on, "Red Thorm, are you quite certain that no one else could have heard the words of Nemasteena's spell?"

"Absolutely."

"And is there no possibility of bringing Nemasteena here to repeat them for us?"

"None whatsoever," he said flatly.

"I feared as much. I will have to take other measures. It will be necessary to take Eda and her translator to the workroom," said Princess gravely.

An irate scrickle, and the spider said, "Eda doesn't want to go anywhere without her house. It makes her feel secure."

"I understand. I will have it taken to the workroom," said Princess.

"And what of me? What am I to do?" Red Thorm inquired.

"I thought you might carry the house."

"Just because I transported Eda's house and brought it here, that does not mean that I carry it from room to room on demand. I am a prince, my lady, not a porter!"

Princess shrugged. "All right, don't carry it. Go join your men."

"I shall leave if the fair Eda so desires."

A chirk, and the spider said, "Eda says you can leave when you like and go where you please, and don't hurry back." When Princess turned an angry frown on the creature, it declared, "Don't blame me. I'm only translating."

In a voice tight with suppressed anger and outraged dignity, Red Thorm said, "I see. Very well. Eda shall have her wish." Bowing low to Princess, he said, "Good night to you, my lady. I wish you success in your efforts. And now, I bid you all farewell." And turning on his heel, he

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stalked from the room. Moments later the front door slammed.

Smiling to put her tiny client at ease, Princess said, "Let's get right up to the workroom. I have to do some research on your spell, and you'll be safe there while I'm working. There'll be no need for the house."

"Eda wants to know how you expect us to get there," the spider said.

"Just follow me."

"Aren't you going to carry us?"

"I'm a princess, not a porter. This way, please."

As her magical studies progressed, Princess had become more familiar with the contents of her husband's workroom. So familiar was she, in fact, that she referred to it as "our workroom," and had already presented Kedrigern with rough sketches for enlarging it to provide a second worktable and more bookshelves.

Even so, it took her the better part of the evening to locate what seemed by every indication to be the proper counterspell, and to assemble all the necessary ingredients. By the time she was ready to begin, she was blinking and gritty-eyed with fatigue, and not a sound had come from either the spider or cricket for over an hour, nor had they moved from their perch in the shelter of an overhanging cover of a large spelling book, topmost of a stack at one end of the cluttered table. Princess laid a weight on the proper page of the great white book of counterspells and studed the proper passage closely, and her heart sank. It was in one of the elder tongues, a twisting thicket of angular symbols that stood for words difficult for human vocal apparatus to pronounce properly even after decades of practice, and she had been at this for only a few years. Kedrigern had helpfully provided a marginal gloss and phonetic transcriptions of the most horrendously difficult passages; nevertheless, Princess looked upon the closely written lines with trepidation. Even if she brought off this counterspell, she was going to have sore jaws and a hoarse voice for at least a week. And if she did not bring it off, if she mispronounced one of the key words, slurred a crucial phrase, then Eda. . . . No. It was best not even to think of the consequences of failure.

"Eda? Are you awake, Eda?" she asked very softly.

She received no response. With a sigh of relief, she blew out the candle and tiptoed from the room. After a good night's sleep, she told herself, she would be ready for any counterspell in the book.

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In the morning she felt considerably better, though still not exactly bursting with confidence. She ate breakfast slowly, postponing her return to the workroom until the latest possible moment. Even as she dawdled, the thought of Eda, impatient to be a woman again, filled her with guilt. She knew that feeling, and it was dreadful. The counterspell had to succeed. It simply *had* to, that was all. And without further delay.

She pushed her dish aside resolutely, stood, and started for the workroom. At the thought of the long, demanding session that awaited her, she craved a few final moments in the morning sunshine, and paused in the hallway. As she hesitated, she heard the sound of hoofbeats coming very close, a neighing, a single loud bang on the front door, and then the hoofbeats again, now receding. She rushed to the door, nearly colliding with Spot as the troll burst from the kitchen to answer the door.

"Yah! Yah?" Spot cried excitedly.

"I don't know. Open it, and we'll see," she replied.

Spot drew the bolt and opened the door. On the doorstep lay a small leather purse. Princess picked it up. It was heavy, and it clinked pleasantly when she hefted it in her hand. She took it into the front garden, seated herself, and emptied the contents into her lap. Twenty gold pieces and a letter fell out of the purse.

The gold pieces, flashing and glittering in the morning sunlight, were a pretty sight. The letter was not. It read as follows:

> My Dear Madam:
>
> Do what your vaunted powers enable you to do for the rebec player whom I leave in your keeping. I hereby renounce all my claims on the ungrateful creature. She is free to marry whom she chooses. If you should somehow manage to restore her to human form, you have my permission to marry her off to some person of her own class, if he will have her.
>
> If neither you nor your husband can despell her, please return the contents of this purse, retaining one coin to pay for last evening's simple but sustaining fare.
>
> If the rebec player should be despelled, it is my wish that the spider be squashed forthwith. Do so, or risk the displeasure of
>
> Red Thorm, Prince of Umberdure

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Princess crammed coins and letter into the purse and stood up like a woman with a mission. Her expression was alarming to behold. She strode to the gate and looked down at the clearing, where the dust of furious labor was still settling. The tents had been struck, and Red Thorm and all his men and horses were gone.

Turning smartly, she reentered the house and made her way straight to the workroom. She marched in, tossed the purse on the table, opened the windows, flung back the shutters, and announced, "Get ready, Eda. You're going to be despelled."

"Eda was wondering if you'd forgotten us," said the spider.

"She was, was she? What were *you* thinking?"

"I was sure you'd abandoned us."

"Well, you're wrong. Get down here on the table, both of you," Princess said. Rolling back her sleeves, she dipped her left thumb into a shallow dish of greenish powder and described two small circles on the tabletop. "Stand in these," she ordered them.

"Wait a minute, now. You're not going to turn me into a human being, are you?" the spider asked, hanging back.

"I'm not spelling, I'm despelling. You'll go back to being whatever you were before Nemasteena spelled you."

"Good. I've had about all I want of you lot," said the spider, stepping to the center of one circle.

Princess held back her reply. She dipped her other thumb into a dish of pale yellow powder and drew a triangle around each circle. At the farthest tip of each triangle, she carefully traced a runic figure in thick blood-red paste, then paused to wipe her fingers clean. The messy part was over. The hard part was about to begin.

She looked down at the abrupt crooked symbols in the open book of counterspells, and her confidence wavered. She took a deep breath, held it, then let it out in a long, loud sigh. In all fairness to Eda, one thing remained to be done before she could proceed.

"I'm ready to begin the crucial part of the counterspell, Eda, but before I do, there are two things you must know," she said, reaching for the purse and taking out the letter. "Red Thorm has gone. He left this letter, and I think you should know the contents, which I consider—"

A skreek from the cricket, and the spider announced, "Eda says to get on with it, please."

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"I will read her the letter first, and I prefer to do so without further interruption," said Princess firmly, and proceeded to read Red Thorm's farewell missive.

When Princess finished, she lowered her eyes to the page. A furious outburst of scrickling, chirking, and other crickety stridulations burst from Eda. To spare the unfortunate creature's feelings, Princess did not look up, but feigned complete absorption in the text before her. Then, suddenly, the insect noises ceased and an unfamiliar female voice was howling: "—egotistical, pompous, arrogant, ham-fisted, pea-brained, self-satisfied. . . . I'm speaking! I have a voice again! I'm a woman! You've done it! You've — ow!"

Princess looked up and saw an attractive, neatly dressed young woman of no more than seventeen standing on the table rubbing her head where she had just bumped it against the low ceiling. A rebec was slung around her neck. For a moment, Princess was nonplussed, for she had not recited a single syllable from the page before her; then she recovered her wits and said, "The second thing I wanted to tell you is that the counterspell works very quickly. Sorry about the bump."

"It doesn't matter. I'm a woman again, a real woman, not an insect! Oh, it's been terrible. You can't imagine what it was like, my lady," Eda said, climbing down from the tabletop.

"Yes, I can, dear. Remember, I was a toad myself once. So I know that you'd probably love a hot bath, and a fresh outfit, and a good lunch, and then you can tell me the whole story."

"Oh yes, my lady, yes! There's nothing I'd — oh my, the spider! Where's the spider? I didn't step on the little creature, did I?"

"I hope not. That would please Red Thorm, and that is the one thing we —ah, there it goes, Eda, safe and sound." Princess pointed to the bookcase between the windows. The spider was just slipping between two large volumes on the bottom shelf.

"I do hope it will be all right. It was a good translator," Eda said.

"It will have plenty of company. Come, Eda," said Princess, ushering her to the door.

They took lunch out under the trees, and when they had finished the last crumb, Princess said, "Now you must tell me everything."

"I don't recall much. It's all a bit fuzzy," Eda confessed.

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"That happens sometimes, after an unusually powerful spell. It's been years since I was disenchanted, and yet I still have huge gaps in my memory."

"Maybe it's better that way, if all I'm missing are memories of Red Thorm. He's a detestable villain. I'd be happy to forget him completely."

"That's something to consider. But before you do, would you mind telling what you do remember? Your case had some interesting features. I'd especially like to know the spell that Nemasteena used on you."

"Oh, I don't remember a bit of that, my lady. It was all so very sudden, you see."

"They usually are. Can you recall anything at all?"

Eda frowned and chewed on her lip. After a time she said, "I had come to play for Red Thorm. My music soothed him. Or so he claimed," she added, looking up darkly. "When I entered, he and that wretched fairy godmother were shouting and shaking their fists — a terrible scene, my lady — and she kept saying that Red Thorm was throwing himself away on riffraff. I remember *that* very clearly."

"Fairy godmothers are sometimes overprotective. It makes them inconsiderate of others' feelings."

"This one was certainly inconsiderate. I . . . I think I cried out in indignation . . . and she turned to me with an evil expression on her sour old pinched-up face and said . . . oh, I can't remember!"

"Do try," Princess urged gently.

"I know it was something very nasty. . . . She put on this smile, sweet as cream, but her words were like knives. . . . She said something about how she'd make me suffer as long as I loved Red Thorm. Yes, she definitely said that."

Princess was silent. She did not move a finger. Her attention was absolute as Eda struggled to recall.

"It's coming back," Eda said. She covered her eyes with one hand and raised the other in an appeal for silence, which was totally unnecessary. "Yes, I said I didn't care what she did as long as Red Thorm loved me, and he said that he would love me forever no matter what wickedness Nemasteena worked, and then she mumbled something and pointed her wand at me. . . . The next thing I knew, I was on a great barren plain, and I could only make cricket noises."

"You were a cricket," Princess said.

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"I was. But you despelled me, my lady."

"It was nothing," Princess said quickly, reaching for the decanter. "Have another glass of wine, Eda dear, and let's talk of more cheerful things."

"But how can I ever repay you, my lady? What power! And so swiftly, too!"

Princess laughed lightly and gave a little dismissive wave of her hand and a toss of her head. "Nothing at all, dear child. Really, I didn't do a thing," she said.

"Oh, but you did! You worked a great counterspell!" Eda insisted.

"A trifle. Please say no more about it."

"But I must repay you, my lady. Oh, please let me serve you. I'll serve you faithfully, and play sweet music to cheer you on gloomy days and aid your digestion at mealtimes. I sing, too. And I weave."

"Well. . . ."

"Oh *please*, my lady!" Eda implored with clasped hands.

"Very well, Eda. You may serve me until the end of summer. But you must observe certain conditions."

"Anything, my lady!"

"All right. First, you must wipe this dreadful episode from your memory. Expunge it completely. Never speak of it again. It is unhealthy and counterproductive to dwell on past spells."

"If you say so, my lady. But I would much prefer to sing your praises to the world. I can never forget what you have done for me with your great power."

"You needn't forget it, you dear child, but you must keep it to yourself. And if Kedrigern should ever ask about the circumstances of your despelling, you must refer him to me. Agreed?"

"Oh yes, my lady!" Eda said eagerly, laying her hand on her heart. "I will not say a word."

And neither will I, thought Princess. All he'll ever get from me on this one is an enigmatic smile.

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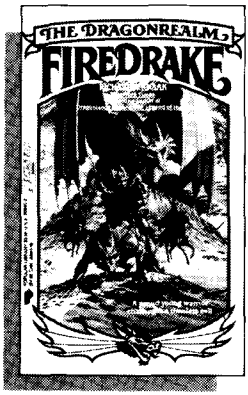

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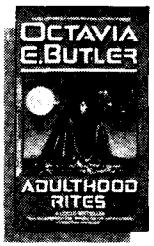

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

NAME: Johnny Byline
OCCUPATION: Author
POWERS: Creativity, style, originality, organizational abilities
WEAKNESS: Writer's block
NECESSARY TALISMAN: Inspiration

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